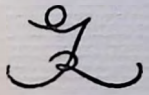
CYNARA

The Story of
Ernest and Adelaide

By
MARION PLARR



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TO
KATHLEEN BALBERNIE

"The small things of life are odious to me, and the habit of them enslaves me; the great things of life are eternally attractive to me, but indolence and fear put them by."

CHAPTER I

DOWN below the Tower of London, where the river sharply bends, stood an old house. It had once been a beautiful house, long ago, before the soot of the industrial age had settled on its walls, and even so it retained the dignity of seventeenth-century proportions. It looked out on that stretch of water known as Limehouse Reach, and within it was conducted the business of a Dry Docker.

Upstairs, in a room on the first floor, sat a young man. He was bent above a desk upon which lay an invoice, with the heading:

C. Dowson & Son Bridge Dock,
Limehouse, E.

and underneath was written in a neat, legible hand:

To caulking	£50	0	0
To scraping off barnacles	25	0	0
To re-painting	48	0	0
To mending pumps, Captain's dog-kennel, & supplying buckets	23	17	3

After a moment's pause the young man added the figures and wrote the total, then a little further down the page and in the middle the letters E. & O.E., and in a corner, very small, his own initials, E. D., which stood for Ernest Dowson.

He did not look like the usual conception of a clerk, this young man. He was rather untidy. His dark brown hair, which was soft in texture and wavy like a child's, looked as though its owner had been out in a high wind and had forgotten to put a comb through it on coming indoors again. His mouth was sensitive, his nose blunt. He was pale and his eyes were unfocussed, so that they seemed to be gazing beyond the confines of the room. His clothes looked as though they had been chosen because they were cheap and serviceable. Nevertheless it was impossible to imagine that he who wore them could, in any circumstances, look other than what he was, gently born.

There were several desks in the room beside the one at which he sat, but they were empty. His father was outside, somewhere about the dock, most likely on board the brigantine the "Nancy Davidson," having a last look round. She was going out to-night.

The young man sitting at the desk felt drowsy. There was a fire in the cavernous fireplace, but the room was not warm. On the other hand it was stuffy. All the windows

were shut. He knew that if he could only summon up the energy to get to his feet and open a window he would be better able to fight off this sleepiness of his; but what was the use? There was nothing in the world to do. It was as though an invisible blanket were pressing him down. The thought came to him, as it often did, that perhaps he would never be able to move again; that he would sit here, and sit and sit till death overtook him.

The room was very quiet. Now and again the sudden hoot of a tug's siren would break the silence, or a rat could be heard scuttling rapidly through one of the runs behind the walls; otherwise it was as still as the grave.

Once upon a time all the desks in the room had been occupied and the occupant of each had been busy every day from morn till eve, but that was before the dock strikes, before the year eighteen-eighty-nine. Ernest Dowson could not remember those days. He had been at Oxford.

For a long time he sat so utterly without movement that the room might indeed have been the grave and he in it, but at last he turned his head slightly, so that his vague and distant gaze now travelled out of the window. What he saw there, however, he had seen so often that it no longer conveyed an impression to his mind. Unlike most waterscapes it was almost always the same. The dingy water with

a line of barges creeping along behind a tug: low grey blocks of buildings that meant the other shore: the masts and spars of a few sailing ships traced delicately as winter trees against the smoky yellow sunset. It was not without charm: far from it: but it was so familiar as to have lost its significance. Besides, his mind was on other things. He was thinking of how, presently, he would take his way westward to that land where his soul was, to that land where men were making history in the world of art and literature; where discussions were taking place such as had not been heard for nearly a century; where everyone was alive, creative, drunk with life.

Dowson was terrified when he thought what he had to do to be worthy of a place in this modern renaissance, but his alarm acted as a spur. He was determined to do something worth while, something that would live. Already he had begun to reach out towards this goal. He was always writing. He had begun to publish an occasional poem or short story: even journalism did not come amiss.

The movement itself was nebulous, being no more than a generation of men who were striving after a particular kind of artistic expression, but there were passwords to its nebulousness. One of these, and perhaps the most important, was the word "exquisite." As long as someone said, or preferably wrote, that

something was "exquisite" its creator was safe. He had leapt the ramparts at a bound. Moreover, once the word had been applied, everything that came henceforward from his hand would be labelled in the same way. Poems, novels, short stories, or rather *contes*, were no longer merely written, they were wrought. Everyone felt himself a Benvenuto Cellini of letters. Cellini had chiselled crystal drinking cups, they chiselled sentences.

One of the results of this striving after exquisiteness was that everything tended to be on the small scale. It was impossible to chisel away at a novel, say, of two hundred thousand words. Human life was not long enough. Nobody would dream, for instance, of using the word "exquisite" in connection with the works of Dickens, or George Eliot, or Trollope. Laughable thought! *They* had risen early in the morning and laboured all day to produce those cumbersome and often unreadable novels of theirs, whereas in France, the country in which "the movement" had its roots, there were those who wrote two alternative words and then sat and gazed at them for as long as it would have taken a Victorian to scribble a whole chapter. This was all to the good, of course. At the same time it meant that the chisellers were limited as to the number of their readers. The larger public, or Philistines, as they were called, didn't care a hoot whether a thing was

exquisite or not. All they wanted was a lot for their money.

But everyone in the movement did not write or paint pictures or draw and there were other passwords beside "exquisite." There was, for example, "brilliant." It was possible to be brilliant without actually *doing* anything at all. Again, there were those who were simply "precious." Sometimes, very rarely, for orchids are not to be found in the hedgerow, one would arise who could be designated all three. So far, indeed, the only two persons who could be said to qualify for that triple honour without reserve were Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde. These two were the acknowledged standard-bearers of the movement, and so brilliant were they, so precious, and so exquisite their work, that it looked as if they would hold their office till the end.

Ernest Dowson knew that he could never hope to be called "brilliant" and he was not sure that he wanted to be known as "precious," but he did hanker after the epithet "exquisite" where his work was concerned. Secretly he also hoped that it might merit some stronger term, such as "fine" or "beautiful." He rather thought that he might one day write a poem that would make them sit up. But he knew that to create such a manner of poem it was necessary to *live* and that was the difficulty—*how* to live in the true sense of the term when it was impossible

to arrive at a certainty of what constituted *Life*.

He thought of the words of Arthur Symons: "A man who goes through a day without some fine emotion has wasted his day, whatever he has gained by it. And it is so easy to go through day after day, busily and agreeably, without ever living for a single instant. Art begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moment he has ever lived. Life has already, to one not an artist, become art in that moment. And the making of one's life into art is after all the first duty and privilege of every man. It is to escape from material reality into whatever form of ecstasy is our own form of spiritual existence." How true all that was. It was the creed of everyone who was really in "the movement."

Meanwhile, the hours he was spending here, in the Docks, were hardly helping him at all, though he was aware that if only he were the right sort of person he might be learning a great deal from them. What was the phrase Victor Plarr had used the other day when he had come to visit them? "What a place for a poet!" But Plarr had that kind of mind. Places were everything to him. He was all for the associations of things. Well, that was one way of being a poet, but not *his* way.

Plarr was certainly rather "brilliant," but he was scarcely inside the movement, for he

was also "scholarly," which was a characteristic that tended to keep you out. If you were scholarly you had to be both the other things as well, otherwise you were likely to be considered old-fashioned and academic. Plarr was, a little. He, Dowson, had met him through a man called Sayle, a Cambridge don, who was very well known and who could possibly be labelled "precious." One of the agreeable things about the movement was that if you had even only the slightest qualification to be a member of it you were bound sooner or later to meet all the other members.

Dowson was inclined to envy his friend Plarr when it came to the question of "brilliance." For this was a quality that enabled you to hold your own in society, if nothing else. Not that society, as such, counted a rap: it was only that here and there it merged insensibly in the movement itself. Dowson thought that his own lack of brilliance was largely due to his never having been to school. During the years when the average English boy was undergoing his gruelling training in the Classics he had, so to speak, been running wild. His father had been passing through a period of delicate health and had been obliged to live abroad, with the result that Ernest had spent most of his youth in France and Italy, picking up what education he might at the hands of village priests. This meant that the men he met with

nowadays seemed almost invariably to be better educated than himself. In the same way, on going to Oxford he had found that none of the things he knew and cared about were of very much use to him. He had soon realised that it would be utterly beyond him to take a degree. His university career had been far from distinguished. He had spent a quiet and somewhat obscure two years at Queen's, whereafter he had come quietly and obscurely down again.

He sometimes felt that he would have shone to more advantage in France, yet there, of course, he was just as likely to be conscious of his Englishness as he was here of not being English enough. He very much preferred France and French ways. The French, it seemed to him, were far less pompous than the English, and when a Frenchman was an artist he was apt to be less self-conscious about it than an Englishman. Fortunately, just now, in this exciting epoch, it did not much matter what you were or what you knew, because everyone was pretending more or less to be something that he was not. He, for his part, passed muster as a follower of the poet Verlaine, which in his humble way he quite sincerely was, being far from possessing sufficient energy to pretend about anything. That was another thing, people all seemed to have more energy than he had. They had so much, indeed, that they were able to get worked up over the most

trivial matters. But there again that only went to show that there was something wrong with him. There always had been and probably always would be. . . .

He was interrupted at this point in the somewhat gloomy trend of his reflections by the sound of footsteps on the outside staircase, and in another moment in walked Captain Braby of the "Nancy Davidson," followed by Mr. Alfred Christopher Dowson.

"I have persuaded Captain Braby to taste some of that 1825 cognac, Ernest," said Mr. Dowson.

"Well, we're all shipshape at last and only the settling-up to be done," observed the Captain, with the hearty air of the sea-dog.

Ernest rose and went to where, in a corner locker such as was to be found in ships, was any amount of grog of one kind and another. Silently he produced the brandy and some fine old glasses out of which to drink it. He was trying to think of something suitable to say to Captain Braby, who, having been in the dock or hanging about in its vicinity for a matter of three months, was quite an old friend of his, but he felt doubtful of being able to encompass the necessary breeziness.

The Captain, however, was in sentimental mood.

"When shall we three meet again?" he

enquired rhetorically, a tear on the verge of his weather-beaten eyelid.

"Ah!" said the elder Mr. Dowson in a sharp voice, and as though he did not find the subject well chosen.

"Never know," cried the Captain, "when you're in a Cape Horner."

"Well, here's to a fortunate voyage and a safe return," said Mr. Dowson with much courtliness as he raised his glass, in which gleamed the choice old brandy.

His son, too, drank to the happy fortunes of the "Nancy Davidson," after which he felt sleepier than ever.

"You're pretty snug here," observed Captain Braby, smacking his lips.

"Ah, that reminds me——" said Mr. Dowson, whereupon he left his chair and went to his desk upon which lay a pile of newspapers.

Ernest watched his father's movements with a sad little smile, the smile of the young for the absurd but at the same time delightful enthusiasms of the old. Not that his father was old. On the contrary. In spite of being nearly fifty he was preposterously one's contemporary, or, as at this particular moment, younger, for he was actually going to read out loud to this fellow Braby Plarr's article about the dock, when it was only too evident that the Captain didn't want to have read to him or to have to

read anything whatever that was not connected in some way with himself.

Mr. Dowson seated himself and said: "Listen to this. ' . . . There are offices among the docks, on the shores of murky Thames, which should be full of inspiration to some at least of their inmates. Where the great lock-gates divide the dripping shadows of the Dry Dock from the main flood of the river stands an old-fashioned house of business. There are no tile-paven passages, no lift, no smart commissionaires here. To gain admittance to the sanctum where our friend the Dry Docker transacts his leisurely affairs you must push strenuously through a heavy yard-gate, mount a wooden outside staircase and knock and ring as though you were at the door of a private house. The rooms within once gained, you are wafted away from the nineteenth into the eighteenth century at once. . . . "

The familiar voice went on, but Ernest contrived not to listen to it. He was thinking that he would not be anything like so youthful of heart or mind as his father at the age of fifty, if indeed he lived so long. He did not believe that he would live to be very old. He had been laughed at for saying so but he had a presentiment that he would not survive the end of the century: another nine or ten years . . . Curious thought.

"Good, eh!" said Mr. Dowson, breaking off.

"Not so bad," conceded the Captain.

"Quite a young fellow too—friend of my son's here. I'll give you a copy to take away with you, so that you can read it through at your leisure. I've got plenty more, as you see . . . and I'll write the name at the bottom in case he's heard of some day—as he's pretty nearly sure to be—eh, Ernest? Then you'll be glad to have this among your archives."

But Captain Braby, who did not look as if he preserved that kind of archive and whose mind had wandered off to more important matters, said: "Well, I shall have to be moving along. There are one or two little things I want to attend to before we go out. You won't take it amiss if I say we've been here long enough? There was a time when I began to think we never *should* get a cargo."

"Still," observed Mr. Dowson, "it's a satisfactory one now you *have* got it," but a sensitive hearer might have noticed that there was that in his tone which was for his own as much as for his client's reassurement.

"Not so bad—not so bad——" was the Captain's comment, "but," he continued, dropping his voice a trifle, "the windjammer's on its last legs. There's no doubt of it. You and I are going to see the last of the full-rigged ship, Mr. Dowson. A three-masted schooner on the high seas'll soon be as out of date as well——as that map up there——" and he nodded

his head to indicate a map of the world that hung above the mantelshelf, which had underneath it the dedication "To the Gentlemen of New Lloyd's" and the date 1816, and was curious in that it showed Greenland intersected by a number of canals designed to let shipping through to China and the Indies.

But Mr. Dowson did not want to hear that the sailing ship was doomed: he knew it already, just as he knew that many of the ship-masters who came into the Port of London anchored in the fairway rather than pay what they considered the exorbitant charges of the London dockers. He knew all that. Another thing he knew, a thing of which indeed he was always and painfully aware, was that his was a very small dock. The end of the sailing ship meant the end of the Dowsons as dockers.

He sighed. There was a sameness about these interviews. In another minute he was going to have to present Captain Braby with his bill and to see his face as he read it. Yet the total of one hundred and forty-seven pounds odd for the rehabilitation of the "Nancy Davidson" would show only the barest margin of profit. It was always the way. Already, indeed, he had been obliged to mortgage the dock and for an absurdly small sum and to, of all people, his own foreman. That was the way life treated you. . . .

However, with never mind what ill grace,

Captain Braby did in the end pay up and went away to see to those one or two last little things before going out, and Ernest tidied up his desk in readiness for the morning. And presently he too went out to come eventually to a District Railway station.

CHAPTER II

DOWSON thought of the District Railway of his generation as having many affinities with hell. There was the reek of sulphur, and on foggy days there were braziers in the tunnels that sent forth an infernal glow.

He seemed to spend an unnecessarily large part of his life travelling about in this latter-day Tophet, where the advertisements bade the traveller drink Hunyadi Yanos and smoke B.D.V., and thin warning strips along the edges of the windows told him not to stick his head out. As if anyone would want to encounter the icy darkness of those tunnels! Hell was cold, surely, in spite of the fire.

A further and more searching torment lay in wait for those who were susceptible to such things and that was the thought of what lay overhead while the train puffed through those subterranean labyrinths. The streets, the slums, the tenements, the dirt, the smells. And then your mind travelled further and thought of these things in detail: of the lives of the thousands of human beings that were moving about above you, of their deaths and of the women

labouring even now in child-birth: of the children who were being beaten: of the dogs that howled in pain: of the men who starved in corners or who drank in gin palaces, or murdered their fellow men or hanged themselves: and of the police who strove in vain to stem the tide of vice and crime that flowed beside the shores of human sorrow: and of the philanthropists—the Salvation Army that played accordions and banged drums and sang through its nose and confessed at the corners of shabby streets to sins that would have shamed the Borgias: and of the doctors and nurses who penetrated cellars and attics that one would have believed existed only in nightmares, to help those who festered there to reproduce others of their kind: and of the vermin and the rats and the damp and the cemeteries—yes, there were corpses buried in that sour earth overhead . . . and the soot and the fog through which the sun shone, when it did, with a pale viscid light that bore no warmth on its beams: and of the lack of air and of the wind, that, when it came, was full of dust and that whirled newspapers and garbage here and there: and of the stalls where the people bought their food, their kippers and their sausages, under paraffin flares: and of the mud underfoot: and of the hopelessness and depression of mind of those who crept about these streets and never saw beauty except in dreams. . . .

The only way to escape the endless concatena-

tion of these thoughts was to bury oneself in a book, at least so Dowson found. He got through any amount of reading on the way to and from his work.

Sometimes, though, he would find himself in the same carriage as students from the London Hospital. They would come hurtling in, full of merriment, ready for anything: splendid healthy-looking fellows, most of them, always asking each other for matches with which to light their strong manly pipes and smelling, not unpleasantly, of some powerful deodorant soap.

Dowson admired these men. They seemed to him so full of life, so magnificently impervious to the sense of horror that beset poor weak wretches like himself at the mere thought of hospitals. He would listen, fascinated, to their talk.

"That's a good stout leg you've got hold of, Brownlow. Ought to be able to do some important work on that."

"I'd rather have your arm. More in arms. Care to swop?"

"See that old girl they brought in last night?" enquired another. "Husband threw a lighted lamp at her head. Pretty good mess."

"No, I'm in Out-Patients'—and let me tell you, Whitechapel had the bloodiest fight in history this afternoon. Spent the last two hours up to the elbows. Talk about stitches—four

hundred at least. One chap . . . I say, anyone got a match?"

"Allow me——" put in Dowson, producing a box of Swan wax vestas.

"Thanks. You one of us?"

"No. But I know some of your men."

That always broke the ice, if, indeed, anything so cold could be thought of in the same day as men in whom life flowed so warmly as in these students of medicine.

Someone was saying—"What are the new lodgings like, Brownlow?"

"Not too vile, if they weren't such a devil of a way out."

Dowson was asked where he lived.

"Maida Hill——"

"Not bad. People live out of town?"

"No, I live with them. . . . "

"Fares run away with such a confounded lot," complained Brownlow.

Dowson said that he thought it a matter of comparatively small importance where you *slept*, it was that you must have somewhere to *work*. You could always count on getting some sort of shakedown for the night, but it was essential to have a permanent table and a chair and a certain amount of privacy if you meant to do any decent work.

"If you'll forgive my saying so," said a serious-looking fellow of twenty-four or so, who had not yet spoken, "I shouldn't do too much

of that sort of thing. Sleeping just anywhere, I mean. It's bad for the health."

"Oh, my health's all right. I'm as strong as a horse, really."

"Well, all I can say is, you don't look it."

Dowson said in a shy sort of way that was very engaging, "I suppose you fellows can tell at a glance when anyone's got anything the matter with them."

That made them laugh, the loud strong laugh of youth, and one of them exclaimed—"Oh, you laymen!"

But Dowson was undeterred. "I always think of you as knowing all about what's inside us—the blood, the heart, the brain . . . "

"Wish we did. Things'd be easier. Ask Brownlow here what he knows about the endocrine gland."

Brownlow blushed the deep slow blush of shame.

Dowson thought, "He's been caught out at some time or other over that. At an examination, I expect," and he felt sorry for Brownlow, who was very fair and young and looked defenceless.

"But that terrible story one of you told just now," he said, "about that poor old woman who had a lamp . . . "

" . . . chucked at her head. Yes, and I didn't tell you the whole of it, not by a long chalk. Jove, what an old sport! Won't accuse her

husband. Will have it it was an accident. But of course it couldn't have been."

Young—so young! Yet they saw things like that. They were lucky—that was life. But how could they bear it? Those like Brownlow, for instance, who blushed so easily? But perhaps they couldn't. Perhaps deep down inside they were as horrified as he was. Perhaps that was why they laughed so loudly and presently would drink so much and go careering about London half the night like unbroken colts . . .

One of them was saying—"But it's not only fares—everything's so damned expensive. You can't get a decent meal under three-and-six."

"You should try Soho," advised Dowson.

But someone said, "Can't say I care for this foreign stuff."

In this friendly fashion the time would pass very agreeably till they came to Charing Cross, where Dowson would leave them, for he was generally bound for a turning out of Piccadilly Circus called Sherwood Street.

CHAPTER III

IN the year eighteen-ninety-one a book had been published that was to have an infinite, if secret, effect on contemporary life. This was Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

It was about one of those young persons who, from *Pamela* onwards, have been the victims of men who belonged to a loftier station in life than themselves. This time, however, the soul of the young person had been the object of the scrutiny of a man of genius, with the result that she was to join the immortals of literature and to be spoken of henceforth as though she had really lived.

The man who was young when the book appeared began to see *Tess* everywhere, behind bars and counters, on the stage, even on the street. He looked at that new housemaid of his mother's just up from the country, with a new eye. It was a piquant notion that she, like Tess, might have a soul. With all this Socialism and Democracy about one might even marry her.

At the same time, over in France, there was Pierre Loti, who, though of gentle blood

himself, wrote with the most exquisite understanding of those who were not, from the peasants of his native land to the peoples of the Orient.

"*Mon Cher*," wrote Dowson to his friend, Victor Plarr, "*toto meo corde* I felicitate you. I can't say how charmed and impressed I was. It was very good of you to have me; I hope I did not stay too long. Yes, *mon cher*, you and I are the only Wise persons in a blind generation. What is, then, this good, sweet, fresh aroma of the Lotiesque which the conventional culture of a drawing-room never produces? I think of my cousins—two very pretty, accomplished and amiable girls, as attractive as any girls *istius generis* whom I know, and at once I feel that they are utterly without that curious, indefinable charm which I recognised yesterday; and which makes the blood dance in my veins whenever She speaks or smiles or moves.

"It seems to me that at last, by an affection of this kind one does really, in a life of shadows and dreams and nothings, set one's foot upon the absolute—the *τό τι ἦν εἶναι*.* Adieu.

Floreas! Gaudeas in perpetuum."

Dowson had been meeting for the first time the girl to whom his friend was secretly engaged, who was as English as a primrose and who was more likely therefore to have found a place

* The essence of the thing.

between the pages of a book by Thomas Hardy than by Pierre Loti, but he had to have his Frenchman. However, the She who made the blood dance in his veins whenever she spoke or smiled or moved was exotic enough, for she was a certain Adelaide Foltinowicz, otherwise known as "Missie," the daughter of a Polish restaurant-keeper in Soho.

Dowson had discovered the restaurant of Joseph Foltinowicz quite early in his time in London, when Adelaide was eleven years old. She was always in and out, and Dowson loved children. This, moreover, was a girl-child, that is to say a potential woman, over and above which rather shocking fact, she was a child who knew a very great deal about the harsher side of life.

Her people had been driven out of their country. They were poor if not penniless. They were of good family and had come down in the world. Her father had a constant struggle against ill-health.

She was a Pole and Poles are often beautiful and sometimes very beautiful indeed, and even if not remarkable to look at are still strange. *Pole*—you can say it over and over to yourself and it has an odd sound. It is a person who comes from very far off like someone in a fairy tale. They are a people who are unhappy and oppressed, who dance and are musical, who wear bright-coloured clothes and are very, very

romantic. You feel that they know things that you don't and never can—*old* things. They have smelt blood and been close to death. They love their country and are exiles and are not very practical when it comes to grappling with fresh conditions of life, which is not at all surprising when you remember what they have come from and where—the other side of Germany and close to Russia. Nearly the East. Queer old dim romantic cities and thwarted patriotism. . . .

Adelaide was all this and she was *Innocence* as well. She was the one sure sweet uncomplicated refuge from the harpies. She could sit on one's knee and there would be no thought in one's own or in anyone else's mind that could spoil the loveliness of having her there. She could kiss one good-night.

So, you would say, could many another child, for Dowson knew lots of people who had children. Ah, but those would be well fed, happy and protected children, with nurseries perhaps, and dolls and toys of an expensive kind, who would know none of the things that this child knew!

Besides, this was in all ways a wonderful child, for she too was happy. She could laugh and sing although her father looked at her with eyes of sorrow. Hers was the priceless secret of how to keep her life intact in the midst of adversity.

Outside the door of number nineteen Sherwood Street Dowson paused. He always did, because this was somehow a rather important moment in his day.

Through a chink came the most delicious composite smell of cooking, with, as was always the case with continental cooking, onion in the ascendant. The food here, though simple, was surely as excellent as any to be found in Soho: and not only was it good and wholesome and well prepared, it had just that delightful touch of the unfamiliar due to its having come from Polish hands. In the same way, the appointments of the place, though far from elaborate or luxurious, were pleasing because they were unusual. This blind, for instance, which covered the glass upper portion of the door was not the featureless thing these blinds were ordinarily, though he couldn't quite say *how* it differed except that it was—well—a *Polish* blind, and that it happened to be the background for the name *Foltinowicz* in gilt lettering.

In the meantime Adelaide, generally called "Missie," who was Poland and Innocence, and everything in the world that was sweet and young and romantic, was in the inner parts of number nineteen Sherwood Street helping with the washing-up. It was just upon dinner-time and there shouldn't have been any, but some had been left over from middle-day.

She was singing a little song under her breath partly because while so doing she could forget the smell of grease, but mostly because, though for no particular reason, she felt happy. As a matter of fact, she usually did feel happy. Keeping a restaurant was rather fun. Nice people came to it. They talked to you and said what a pretty girl you were; and it was fun carrying the trays and seeing that people got what they liked to eat, and best of all was the thinking of things to say in answer to what they said to you. And what was nice again was that they were nearly always men, and men were nicer than women—much nicer. She did not think she would have cared about the restaurant at all if only women came there. Women criticised what you did, whereas men thought that you did everything beautifully.

At that precise moment in her reflections Auguste, the waiter, put his head round the door and said, "Here is Herr Dowson, Fräulein!" which was odd, because this Herr Dowson was the gentleman who, above all others, thought that what one did was perfect.

No need to pull down one's sleeves for Herr Dowson. He didn't mind about things like that. He didn't seem to see such things. He cared for what you were inside, and that made it easy to get on with him, because if you were in a bad temper or in that sort of mood when everything irritated you, he understood that that wasn't the

real you and just waited till you got over it. Other people weren't like that: they got cross and said you were naughty, which of course was absurd. You weren't naughty at fourteen. You were simply annoyed with people's stupidity.

She waited to think all these things, because although she wanted to go straight in and see Herr Dowson and ask how he was she knew that it was a good plan to keep him waiting. Nothing was more certain than that the more you waited for a thing the more you wanted it.

But at last she simply couldn't wait any longer and then, at once, she was sorry she had waited at all—he looked so lonely. Somehow he often looked like that, even when he was with other people.

She said in her clear child's voice, with its breath, no more, of a foreign accent, "I could not come before. I was helping to wash the things from lunch."

"So I see."

"Are you shocked that I come to you like this, with my sleeves rolled up?"

"On the contrary, I'm glad to see that you are so useful."

"Useful!" she echoed, laughing. "What do you know about being useful?"

"Me? Oh, I'm very useful. I've just been helping to send a ship to sea."

"Where's it going? Wouldn't you like to

be in it? I should like to come and see those ships."

"Yes, why not?"

"Could I—truly? You mean that?"

"Of course."

"I should like to come," she said, "if *you* were there."

She sat down at the opposite side of the little table and leaned her elbows on it, framing her face in her hands. From the wrist to the elbow her arm made a charming line, long and slender. She was tall for her age. By the way, how old was she exactly? . . .

"You've got a birthday soon, haven't you, Missie?"

"Yes, the week after next. I shall be fourteen."

"Fourteen, eh! What would you like me to give you for your birthday?"

"You mustn't spend your money—not like that——" she said, very grave all of a sudden.

"Oh, but I can't let your birthday go by."

She leaned a little towards him across the table and said in an undertone, "You may write me a poem."

"But that won't be nearly as nice as . . ."

" . . . as what?"

"What do great big girls of fourteen like for their birthdays? Let me see now . . ."

"This one wants a poem. Look! . . . When I get quite old—you know—when they have put up a statue to you, out there, in Piccadilly

Circus, I shall be able to show my poem to people and say—'That's by *him*. He wrote it for me on my fourteenth birthday.' Then I shall be celebrated too."

He was enchanted with her conception of him as *grand poète* in the continental sense. No doubt, in her land, they did put up statues to poets, but even in Poland you would have to be a sort of poet laureate, and write odes to liberty and invocations to patriotism before they commemorated you in this way. He would never be that sort of poet.

A great part of the fascination of their intercourse, from his point of view, lay in watching the gradual unfolding of this foreign mind of hers. It was as though the root of some unknown flower, brought from distant lands by an explorer all brown and small and shrivelled, was throwing up shoot after shoot in spite of the alien soil in which it had been planted. There was something oddly touching about its trueness to type, mysterious too, and a little frightening. What might she not know? Already she was older than most English girls of her age. Of course she had had a wider range of experience than most girls, but that did not account for the difference. It was deeper, more fundamental than that. In any case it was a quality that entrapped the imagination. On the Continent, in France, they had a phrase to express just this thing. They said of a person, or a country, or a

race, that they were *vieux civilisé*. That was it. That expressed Adelaide to perfection.

He said: "But, Missie, you've forgotten. There is a statue already in Piccadilly Circus."

"I know," she gave her high child's laugh, "a statue of *love*, isn't it?"

They were silent.

He was thinking. She was going to be fourteen. But you couldn't measure people by the number of their years. That was only one of the idiocies to which mankind was prone. There were men and women who remained children till the grave engulfed them, not because they had never known the changes and chances of existence, but because they had never *thought* about them. You could see from looking into those candid eyes of Adelaide that *she* thought: that life was not simply brushing her with its wings.

An idea came to him. "How would you like to come and see the ships on your birthday?"

She clapped her hands. "Yes, yes! Oh, can I?"

He saw that there were tears in her eyes, poor child, tears of excitement.

She said, suddenly anxious, "You'll be there, won't you?"

"Of course."

"I don't want to go if you're not there."

"But I work there, Missie. I'll call for you on my way in the morning and bring you back

when you've seen all you want to. How would that do?"

"Oh, yes. I should like that." She slipped from her chair, came round the table to where he sat, then, shyly, and with infinite sweetness, kissed him.

At that moment, for some reason or other, he felt a strange agitation. Everything was as usual, yet suddenly everything was utterly different. There sat Madame Foltinowicz at the receipt of custom, looking, for all that she was quite a young woman, as though she had sat there since the world began and as if she would continue so to sit until the crack of doom; yet he felt as though he were seeing her for the first time. Missie was nearly fourteen. It couldn't be that! How could it? Nothing stood still. . . . He was going to be twenty-five in August, but that was not a fact that seemed to shake the foundations of the Universe. It *was* Missie. O God, it was! . . . . Never to feel the lovely softness of her arms again. Her lips . . .

He couldn't stay. He couldn't eat. He must go.

"What's the matter?" said Missie calmly. "You want your dinner, yes? There are Polish fritters to-night. What do you think of that? Nice, eh?"

Yes! If she brought them. He could eat the very husks of existence at her hands.

He had eaten what she had brought him, but really he had hardly known how. His one thought was to get away and think things over. But what? What was there to think about? He felt confused. She had sat with him while he had eaten, to see, she said, that he ate, and they had fallen into a strange lumpish silence.

Somehow or other he had got away and had walked up Regent Street and along Oxford Street and down Edgware Road and now was back in his room at number fifteen Bristol Gardens, Maida Hill. He wanted to write—to express something, but what? Adelaide was nearly fourteen. He must tell someone that. He drew a piece of paper towards him and began a letter to Plarr.

"I was in Poland to-night: why did you not drop in to coffee? *Die Kleine* instead of changing, altering, repelling; as I {hoped / feared} might happen, in the nature of things, seems to grow in grace and favour daily. What a terrible, lamentable thing growth is! It makes me mad to think that in a year or two at most the most perfect exquisite relation I have ever succeeded in making must naturally end. Yes, it makes me mad! One ought to be able to cease caring for anyone exactly when one wished: it's too difficult: or one ought to be able to live entirely in the present. Something is distinctly rotten in the state of Denmark. *Mon cher*, I am afraid you have a very

bad influence over me! You see I can't even write to you without becoming unreasonable. I shall have to read a sermon of Butler's and a little Mill before I go to bed. One ought to be exactly as one should like to be, all at once and always! I should like to be a sort of combination of Mill and Newman with a little dash of Voltaire. And instead of that—pah! You will tell me I am either insane or insincere, probably both. Forgive me for inflicting these lengthy hieroglyphics on you and believe me—always yours,

ERNEST DOWSON"

It was extraordinary how, by the mere act of putting the thing into words, some of its more distracting elements were, so to speak, exorcised. At once he felt calmer. Letters, he thought, never expressed one tithe of what you felt, for in writing them, even to a sympathetic soul like Plarr, you had to remember such things as punctuation and style and so on, and in thinking of words, as such, you were apt to forget the original pressure of your emotions. How different it was with poetry. A poem . . .

Little lady of my heart! . . .

A simple, direct statement, that. There was no putting all sorts of different interpretations on such a remark. It said what it meant and meant what it said. . . That's what Missie was. He

could feel his heart beating as he looked at the words. Five small words in the middle of a piece of paper. . . .

What next? . . .

Just a little longer

Yes . . .

Love me: we will pass and part
Ere this love grow stronger. . . .

The poem for Adelaide's birthday. But he wouldn't be able to give her that. Oh no! She might interpret it as meaning—well—more than it did: or, rather, other people would do so for her. He would give her a doll—or, no, he had forgotten—some handkerchiefs, or a pair of gloves, or a book.

For the one thing *Innocence* hadn't to do was to reach marriageable age. The moment it did it ceased to be *Innocence* and became *Sex* and there arose the complication of whether or no you wanted to marry it.

In the early 'nineties, as in purely Victorian times, there was a stereotyped conception of the *Ideal Woman*. What with the talk about Women's Rights and one thing and another, she had changed a good deal of late, but her general characteristics could be summed up somewhat as follows:

Superlatively beautiful, of a rather Rubensesque type, she yet had a capacity for looking

lily-like at need. She knew all about the desires of men and was able to sympathise with them, but was very properly without any of her own. She was ready to bear children and to nurture them devotedly, but was far from being unduly domestic in her tastes. She was intellectual enough to appreciate what her adorer was up to, whether he were author, politician, ecclesiastic, scientist, artist, or man of action, but by no means so critical as to be able to throw cold water on his efforts. It went without saying that she was always of one's own class: and this was what you married if and when you found her. She was understood to be just round the corner, as it were, if only you searched long enough.

What the lady was to think about her suitors, as such, was not entered into very closely. It was not really thought to be of much account. But it was to be observed that Dons and people who had got on in the world seemed to go down better with her than the ordinarily hard-up young man. It is to be feared that one of her characteristics was worldliness, but naturally, with such remarkable attributes as she possessed, she had every right to expect comfort and a good home. While still unmarried she was very closely surrounded by creatures called *chaperones*, who, unless you had a private income or the prospect of one, kept you off with the utmost determination. The surprising part of it

was that the cleverer, more charming, gentler and more affectionate you were, the more they kept you at a distance. At least, that was what Dowson found, and he had as good a chance of encountering one of these uncommon hybrids as any man in town, since he was beginning to be known as one who was in "the movement," and was being asked about a good deal.

It was going to add a thousandfold to the difficulties of life if Adelaide were to take on signs of the Ideal. She was still most exquisitely immature, of course. There was nothing about her of the Rubens type, for which thank God, but she was perfectly the lily. She had a pale, cool skin that could not belong to any other flower, and a heavenly throat—only you didn't think about the throat of one so young.

CHAPTER IV

IN those days the Ideal Woman suffered from one or two depressing inhibitions on her own account. Especially was this so if she lived anywhere near the middle of Town. To begin with she could not venture abroad alone at night. For the matter of that it was understood not to be too safe in the daytime either in certain parts of London. You were in danger of being "spoken to." Men had a way of coming up to you and saying things—*what* you were usually too terrified to hear. At other times they would simply follow you about. You couldn't do anything to remedy this because your mouth would be dry and your knees quaked under you. You were in the most frightful and immediate danger, for it was a well-known fact that these men, who were mostly foreigners, could subdue you by the power of the eye, in the street, in broad daylight, as though they were snakes and you a rabbit, and having done that they carried you off in a cab, and you were never heard of any more.

True, you had never known of anyone to whom this appalling thing had happened, but

you knew *of* people who knew someone to whom it had.

If, instead of being Ideal, you were what was known as Strong-minded, you complained straightway to the police. But this was an act requiring such an immense degree of moral courage that it was seldom indeed that it was resorted to. It was held that to admit to a policeman and subsequently to a magistrate that you had been "followed" or "spoken to" was in some mysterious way a humiliation that took a lot of living down.

It was noticeable, too, that the strong-minded seldom married. Men didn't like you to complain of these things. By doing so you proclaimed yourself his enemy. You probably wanted the Parliamentary vote and to be in control of your own money and to be generally unsexed and to *know things*. That wouldn't do at all. It was just as well, therefore, that you should be wholesomely frightened now and then, even if what you feared was of such infrequent occurrence as to be almost negligible. There was always the chastening thought that if you could be kidnapped like this, in the day, within sight, say, of Liberty's shop, what could not happen to you after dark in regions that were known to be disreputable, like Leicester Square? It simply didn't bear thinking about. You never did think about it except in a purely rhetorical way. Fortunately there was no need, for you never

by any chance went there unaccompanied. Indeed, unless the cab or carriage that was taking you to the Lyceum Theatre, or Drury Lane, or the Opera House happened to drive through those parts, you never went there on any pretext whatsoever, and the only members of your sex who did were those whose business took them there, actresses, barmaids, and the like, *and*—but they were scarcely women any more—the victims of those carryings off.

From the top of Regent Street, down through Coventry Street, Leicester Square, the Strand and so to Temple Bar, those were the parts that, after dark, were given over to doings into which it were better that the Ideal Woman shouldn't enquire. But over them, even now, like some great hovering bird of prey, or angel of deliverance, according to how you looked at things, hung the Queen of Strong-minded women, whose name was Mrs. Ormiston Chant, ready to swoop in vengeance on the iniquitous.

Meanwhile, the artists and writers of this period were spending a good deal of their time in these regions, for it was supposed that a close acquaintance with the night-life of a great city would impart a something to their art which it had hitherto lacked. The latter were anxious, for the most part, to write quite frankly about sin, and, since it was felt that in order to write about a thing it was necessary first of all to experience that of which you wrote, they sinned.

Dowson, however, though anxious to write a really good sin poem, felt that there was something a little crude about this sinning for art's sake and then just telling everyone plainly what you had done, so he placed his poem in another epoch, a long way back, two thousand years or so, and called it "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae," which sounded august:

"Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! Thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion . . ."

and Cynara was Innocence and Innocence was Adelaide.

But one of those irreverent and matter-of-fact people, of the sort with whom poets always have to contend, maintained that there was something wrong with this poem.

"Surely the pagan world hadn't begun to worry about the necessity of being faithful," he said. "Why, the Romans were in doubt whether women had souls. Or was this a convert to Christianity? If so, may one ask what he was doing at a feast?

'I cried for madder music and for stronger
wine,
But when the feast is finished and the lamps
expire,
Then falls thy shadow, Cynara. . . .'

Why, my dear Ernest, the fellow must have had a head of cast-iron to be conscious of remorse at that stage of the proceedings."

"It's not meant to be taken quite so literally," faltered the poet.

"Ah, no, my dear chap, this ancient of yours has somehow got that modern nut, the Victorian Conscience, stuck in his vitals."

"But apart from that—don't you like it at all? Isn't there anything you like? The technique? And doesn't it seem to you that there's any truth in the emotion?"

"Yes, it grips you right enough, but I don't think it's up to your best level, all the same."

"You mean, in short, that it's false and theatrical?"

"Now come, I didn't say so."

"I'm sorry you don't care about it, because I put a good deal of work into that poem."

"Oh, you needn't worry, other people'll like it all right."

"But why? . . . How should they, if it isn't good?"

"Because, my dear fellow, it's sensational. It's the absolute anthem of the morning after the

night before. The grey willies in an atmosphere of rose leaves and Falernian. Who's Cynara, by the way?"

"She's in Horace. Book IV of the Odes."

"No, really, I mean."

"She isn't anybody."

"Oh, go along with you! You'll never get me to believe that."

After such an interview as this the only thing to do was to take yourself off somewhere and get drunk. This was quite easy. You only had to go to the "Crown," the public-house in Charing Cross Road to which everyone went after theatre hours, and drink hot port, and you had forgotten all about everything in no time.

* * * * *

The "Crown" was the nearest approach that could be found in London to a Parisian café. It was only a stone's throw from half a dozen stage doors and was the rendezvous for the cream of the literary and artistic movement of the age.

You sat in rows on red plush seats along the walls under the unsparing light of gas chandeliers, and between the heads of those sitting opposite you could catch a glimpse now and then of your face reflected ashily in enormous mirrors. It was a public-house, but with what a difference! For here were the wits, the intellects, the geniuses of a remarkable epoch. You might find yourself sitting tightly pressed against the per-

son of someone who had that day published a book, or a poem, or a drawing that would long outlive the little hour that was ordinarily allotted to such things: while opposite might be sitting that truly remarkable High Church Clergyman who was a Fabian and a County Councillor and an authority on matters connected with the stage, who had, in fact, written a book on the subject of the ballet—*two* books, to be precise—*The Ballet* and *The Theory of Theatrical Dancing*. It was all so advanced, so *new*.

Presently there would come in some of the ladies of the ballet, for the Empire and Alhambra were quite near. Neat, lady-like girls they were, who had just popped in on their way to their homes at Brixton or Tooting Bec and who said "'Ullo, Charley!" to such of their acquaintance as happened to be present in a way that showed how jolly and informal it all was, though at the same time daring and unconventional.

Nobody took very much notice of the pale young man who was getting quietly drunk on the end of one of the red plush seats. Sometimes, indeed, it was a near thing that he didn't get pushed right off, for everyone was occupied with being as "precious" or as "brilliant" as he knew how, and every time someone fresh came in they had to shove up and make room for him.

Near at hand they were discussing the latest pose.

"But they're pretty sordid, don't you think?"

"I do indeed. The language of the inhabitants to begin with."

"And the food."

"Dreadful! It really gives one a glimpse of how the poor dear poor live."

"It's delightfully cheap."

"But the coffee . . ."

"It's nasty at the one at Hyde Park Corner, I grant you, but in Portland Place they do you a very good meal indeed. It's like everything else in this weary world of ours, you have to look out . . . and, after all, my dear fellow, do you ever ask yourself *why* we frequent cabmen's shelters?"

"There's some *urge* in us towards these things, I suppose."

Incongruity, that was the touch! For these artists and men of letters, who had been sinning for all they were worth, had very soon got tired of the old sins (of which, really, when you came to look into it, there did not seem to be many and that were, in any case, dull and middle-class and not bad enough), and when they hadn't for the lives of them been able to think up any new ways of sinning they had fallen back on doing something thoroughly incongruous.

Incongruity was easier to attain than sin and the consequences were apt to be less unpleasant. Boring it might be to pass even a small portion of the night hours with the cab-drivers in their little green shelters, but it could hardly be provocative of remorse. Boring indeed it was, for,

except that they possessed an unusually rich flow of obscene language in readiness for such time as it seemed to them that they were given an insufficient tip, the old horse cabbies were just as dull as any other members of the *petit bourgeoisie*. However, there was felt to be a something that was sordid about those huts of theirs, and although they were run on strictly temperance lines you were aware that in such an atmosphere you might unearth hidden stores of depravity at any moment, and there was at least this to be said, it was illegal for anyone not a cab-driver to enter them.

With the approach of closing-time there were those who spoke together in undertones and cast apprehensive looks at Dowson, the fixity of whose stare suggested that he would be unable to reach home of his own volition.

"Does anybody know where he lives?" asked one.

"Somewhere near Maida Vale," said another. "Is anyone going that way?"

"Stick him in a hansom," suggested a third.

"Well, I don't know. . . . Fare's rather heavy," said he who had first spoken.

"Look here, I'll take him along with me," put in a Good Samaritan. "He can sleep in my studio. Otherwise he'll spend the night in the cells."

"Or worse."

"We don't want any scandal," added the one who had had the idea about the cab.

Presently Dowson heard someone urging him to get up which with difficulty he did, whereupon he felt himself being propelled towards the door of the "Crown" with a number of other people who were none too steady on their feet.

Outside there were several moons and the street wavered about unpleasantly. He was between two shapes, both of whom in a vague way he seemed to know, only he couldn't think of their names at the moment. Later on he would. . . . Meanwhile he had to sing in order to catch the post, but the shapes couldn't grasp how important this was and called upon him to shut up. He tried to explain about the post, but it was no good. They were stupid.

They *wombled* along . . . that was the word . . . *wombled.*

After a passage of years they came to Hyde Park Corner, at least, so said one of the shapes. He also said: "We'll get him in here and give him some hot coffee. I shan't mind some myself, either. By Jove, it's been hard work! . . ."

Again they sat tightly wedged together, but this time it was on a bare bench and the man next to one hadn't written a poem, or painted a picture, or even uttered an epigram, but had simply been driving a cab. His face was as red as fire and he had a large body and he said in a voice charged with pity, "The pore young gennleman's 'ad a drop too much this time, guv'nor, an' no mistike!" For the one thing

that could be counted upon to soften his otherwise granite heart was the spectacle of one who was drunk.

"Better let me give you a lift 'ome, sir," suggested the driver of a hansom.

"I doubt if I've got the price of the fare on me," said the Good Samaritan.

"Better let well alone, Jim," observed another. "It's a ticklish job gettin' 'em in an' out."

"Might fall out on 'is 'ead. They *do*. Narsty bit in the pipers that'd be. *Gent meets with fital accident. . . . The driver's nime was Jimes Barber.* . . . Think o' that!"

"Mine's a steady ole nag. I never 'ave 'ad no trouble."

"No, but you never know. . . ."

"Thank you all very much for your interest," said the Good Samaritan. "I think we'll be getting along now. The coffee may have done him good."

It had. The fumes were wearing off. He was even able to offer a feeble protest about going home to the Samaritan's studio.

"Oh, that's no matter! I may want you to do *me* a good turn some day," said the Samaritan, tucking Dowson's arm under his.

They arrived at last. Dowson was nearly dead. All he wanted was a bed and to stay there.

"I'll put you on the couch in the studio," said his host. "Wait a minute till I get some covers. . . ."

"No," said Dowson, "no—if you don't mind —I'll—I'll—sleep under the piano. . . . "

"Just as you like," agreed the Good Samaritan, unable to hide a smile.

Dowson was too tired to explain, but what he couldn't bear was all that *height*. . . .

CHAPTER V

THE visit to Bridge Dock was, on the whole, a great success.

For some days after he had mooted it Ernest had been anxious in case there should be no ship there when the time came. But two days before there had come in a schooner, a small one, it was true, but still a ship.

"A little ship for a little person," he said.

Adelaide didn't mind how small it was. All ships were the same to her: things of mystery that went out into far seas. There was no sea, even, where she came from.

She would have liked to spend a good deal more time in the galley than Ernest thought quite fitting.

"But look how neat it is," she said. "I should think it must be nice to cook in here."

"A place for everythink, miss," observed the ship's cook, "and everythink in its place. That's my motter."

"And you've got a pussy cat! . . ."

"Yus, black for luck. Bloody *bad* luck's all it bring us this lars voyage. . . ."

"Come along," urged Ernest. "Let's go and have a look at the Captain's quarters."

When they were on deck once more he said, "I was trying to get you to come away from there, Missie. Didn't you see me making signs?"

"Yes, but it was all so *nice*."

"The cook wasn't nice. He looked as if he might be very nasty."

"I think he was a little drunk, don't you?" said Adelaide.

"I dare say. You should have come away when you saw me signalling to you."

"But why? This is my birthday. I think I might do as I please for once."

"Of course! Of course you can, Missie dear. Now let's go and look at the Captain's quarters."

"I don't want to look at the Captain's quarters. I want to stay here."

She knew that she was being disagreeable, but she didn't care. Why was it that grown-up people always wanted to do something you didn't want to do? Mr. Dowson wasn't usually like that. As a matter of fact he wasn't at all like the ordinary grown-up person, but just lately she had noticed that he was getting to be more so. He was beginning to fuss and oppose one.

"Presently we'll go indoors and have some lunch," he said.

She would like that. He had seen to it that she should have something nice to eat. The fore-

man's wife was cooking them some chops and potatoes and greens, with a tart to follow.

"I should like to have lunch in that dear little kitchen we've just seen," she said perversely.

Better to take no notice, he thought. She was probably tired. After all, it was a longish journey and they had made an early start.

"Look how carefully they coil the ropes," he observed hopefully.

She said nothing. She was looking away across the river to the other shore. It was grey, grey as always. It seemed as if it might rain.

"Adelaide, you're not crying?"

"Crying—no! Why should I cry?"

"I don't know. I thought . . ." He broke off. What had he thought? He didn't know. Somehow they seemed to be all at sixes and sevens. He couldn't think why. He usually got on so well with her. It was a secret pride of his that he got on well with nearly all children. He could remember his own childhood with particular clearness and so was able to sympathise with the pathetic *in*coordination of a child's ideas. But was Missie a child any longer? That was just it.

Things went better during lunch. Of course, she had been hungry. Besides, Mr. Dowson senior was there, to shed his own peculiar air of old-world courtliness on the proceedings.

"You should have invited Rowland to come and play with mademoiselle, Ernest."

"I never thought of it," said his son, with perfect truthfulness.

"My younger son," continued Mr. Dowson, addressing Adelaide, "of whom you have no doubt heard, sometimes brings his friends here on their half-holidays to play at being sailors. I believe they have capital fun. He is at school not so very far off, on the edge of the Forest."

"Forest," repeated Adelaide. "I did not know there was a forest. Are there wolves in it? Or bears?"

"I am afraid not," said Mr. Dowson. "One could wish there were, eh, Ernest?"

"Oh, but no!" cried Adelaide, shuddering. "Wolves do terrible things. They eat babies and sometimes, in very cold winters, they attack whole villages," and she crossed herself.

Ernest said: "There are no wolves in England, Missie, or bears."

"Are you sure? People always say that and then, at once, something dreadful happens. My grandmother knew someone who was chased by wolves and when the others came up to rescue him only his boots were left."

"No wonder the idea alarms you," said Mr. Dowson. "But you can rest assured that nothing of the sort ever happens here. According to tradition the last wolf was killed in this country in Norman times, and now we have no more ferocious wild animal than the red deer, the badger, and the fox, all of which are more

frightened of man than man of him, or, more correctly perhaps, which are not *dangerous* to man unless attacked."

But Adelaide looked far from convinced.

When lunch was over she consented to visit the Captain's quarters on board the little schooner, and the Captain, who happened to be at home, quite entered into the birthday spirit and showed her some of the curiosities he had brought back with him from his various voyagings about the world. These included amongst other things a most sinister little object, the size of a cricket-ball, which was the dried-up head of a man, an auk's egg, and the shell of an armadillo. It was such an interesting collection and the Captain had so much to say about the various objects it contained and the different circumstances in which they had been acquired that it was almost four o'clock before Adelaide was able to tear herself away.

"I mustn't be late back for our dinner," she explained.

The best part of the outing, from Ernest's point of view, was the homeward journey in the train, for this was the first time since leaving Sherwood Street in the morning that they had been absolutely alone together. Besides, Adelaide was her nicest self, thanking him most prettily for all his efforts for her amusement.

"I did like it," she said, and took his hand and nestled up to him.

The usual group of medical students came on to the platform while they were waiting for the train to start, but they only looked into the carriage where Ernest and Adelaide were sitting, after which they hurled themselves into the next compartment.

"What a lot of gentlemen," observed Adelaide, wishing they had chosen to travel with herself and Mr. Dowson, for she had caught a glimpse of Brownlow's golden head and liked the look of it.

"Thank heaven they had the tact not to invade our privacy," said Ernest.

"D'you like being alone?" enquired Adelaide, glancing up at his profile wistfully.

"Sometimes. You wouldn't like all those noisy young men to come in here with us, would you, Missie?"

"Why? Aren't they nice?"

"Yes, quite nice, I imagine, but—don't you like being alone with me?"

"Oh yes, of course. I've never *been alone* with you before, have I? "

"No, this is the first time."

They were silent. Adelaide looked at the advertisements.

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed. " 'Drink Hunyadi Yanos!' How funny! Hunyadi Yanos was a man. How can you drink a man?"

"In the same way that you drink a woman when you drink Veuve Cliquot."

"But that's different. That's champagne and she grows it herself. Hunyadi Yanos was a great patriot, and it's only water—look, it says so."

"I expect it's just named after him. I have an idea he lived a long time ago."

"Don't you know about him? He fought against the Turks."

"Oh, a Crusader . . ."

"He saved his country," rejoined Adelaide gravely.

In the carriage next door someone was saying, "Dowson's got a skirt!" and they all looked knowing and there were one or two who winked and laughed and nudged one another.

CHAPTER VI

SO Adelaide was fourteen. And now, gradually, so gradually that Ernest scarcely realised the significance of what was taking place, she came to mean more than Innocence, more even than his verses, and at last was Love itself.

There were times during this period when he was very nearly happy, happier, certainly, than he had ever been in his life before. His was the state of suspension when there is nothing *but* love, or rather the thought of it, for as yet he had told his beloved nothing. She was far, far too young.

Was it possible, he wondered, that there had ever been an Ernest Dowson who had found life so meaningless as to be depressed for days on end? There had, because he could remember being that person, but it had been a very long time ago, and he did not see how he could descend into that particular pit again, unless, indeed, Adelaide herself were to push him back into it. But that was unthinkable. At present he seemed to be floating about on a cloud. If only She too, by some extraordinary chance, were

on another and the two of them might meet and merge. . . .

Meanwhile she often annoyed him, for she, who had such a limitless capacity for being the most adorable individual on earth, seemed to take a perverse delight in showing just how like every other foolish little girl of her age she could be. For instance, she would flirt with men who came into the restaurant—yes, flirt! Of course it wasn't really flirting. She was much too young and innocent and altogether sweet to know that there was such a thing. It was the imitation of it that even the most delightful of her sex seemed to be able to produce by instinct in order to madden any man who was foolish enough to take an interest in her. And then she would skip across to him and say, "I'm fourteen now. I mustn't kiss you any more, you know," with all the complacency of early youth.

She was spoiled, no doubt of it. Her parents gave in to her every whim in what Ernest could not help regarding as the most ridiculous way. It was as though they thought that by doing this they could make up to her for what they themselves had lost. Very natural, no doubt, but he wondered that they couldn't see what a bad effect it was having on the child. In fact, he was sometimes so irritated by this lack of parental wisdom on the part of Foltinowicz *père et mère* that for days together he would keep away from the restaurant. However, it was such

a convenient place in which to dine or to hang about when one had nothing in particular to do that it seemed rather absurd to allow what was, after all, a quite irrelevant feeling, to interfere with one's going there.

And then there were the times when Missie was just the darling little girl he had always known: when she seemed to be, as it were, the distilled essence of the ultimate sweetness of all childhood: when there wasn't a hint of the new, self-conscious, irritating Adelaide. She would stand before him then and say, "I am going to bed. When I say my prayers to-night I will ask that the Holy Mother of Jesus shall hold you in her arms," and at once she was like one of the maidens in the pictures of Fra Lippo Lippi, she looked so pure and young and virginal.

It was at such moments that he would feel his heart contract in an ineffable impulse that seemed to be pity and yet was not; for why, as he asked himself, should you pity those in whom life was opening out like the petals of a flower?

The only way in which he could express the strange sensations that beset him at this time was by writing poems imploring Adelaide not to grow up, for now, it seemed to him, she had reached a stage in life so exquisite that the slightest change must be for something less lovely. Yet she was always changing and always becoming by however little, for much she could not be, more perfect.

There was a drawback to this peculiar state of his, and that was its loneliness. No one seemed ever to have experienced anything quite like it: no one, that was, who happened to be alive today. People like Keats had, and Shelley, though to find what he really felt it was necessary to go back to the Latin poets, especially to Propertius. His own friends, who must, surely, some of them, at some time or other, have known what it was to feel love, had yet an odd blank way of looking at him when the subject was mentioned. All except Plarr, and even he had the most extraordinary gift for remaining impersonal and of suddenly turning modern and scientific and attributing all you felt to some obscure physical cause, at which moments it was difficult to remember that he too was a poet.

But, since it was not yet permissible to disclose what he felt to Adelaide herself, and since, when he felt these things, it was necessary to speak of them or something unforeseen might happen, it was imperative to write to the only living being who appeared at all able to comprehend his feelings, and that was Plarr.

"Cher Vieux,

What must you think of me? It must be three weeks since I wrote you a ream of spleen. And, a day or two ago, I found I had posted the letter in a pocket! . . . May we soon meet in Valhalla, at any rate, for after Götterdämmerung there is

haply Valhalla, and I think this is the twilight of the gods; but what I mean exactly, I could put more precisely in a sonnet, which might be found obscure. What are you doing? If you have a spare moment, write to me; your letters appeal to my τό τι ἦν εἶναι more than anything: or what are you not doing? which is generally the most important form of action! I do nothing, live in a sort of dream, of nothing: and I have never before lived to such an exhausting extent. To find an irrational residuum in oneself, eluding one's last analysis, is by some strange freak reasonably a consolation. Does not a great, personal passion become a whole metaphysic? At least an abstract metaphysical notion, or a sacrament, or a mystery, or a miracle, in certain lights, becomes more credible than any material thing or appearance, one's mere going, or doing, or talk or juxtaposition, or the death one will die.

"But I don't want to send you an essay on the absolute, and will conclude with a prayer for forgiveness, for these random impressions. But I wanted to write a word to you; and this by the way, because of all the men I know you are the most likely to find me intelligible. Though I have done, nor said, nor suffered anything tangible since I last saw or wrote to you, I write as an illuminato: I seem to have seen mysteries, and if I fail to be explicit, it is because my eyes are dazzled."

Now his *Cher Vieux* was a trifle reassured by the rather more abstract tone of this letter, for he had begun to think that his friend Dowson was getting into a somewhat dangerous state. Not that he believed that there was anything *in* this enthusiasm for that little creature in the place they called *Poland*, who, to begin with, was the merest child, but you had to remember that Dowson was a poet. You never could tell what a poet was likely to be up to next when he imagined himself in love. In the present case, moreover, the poor dear man was so unworldly that he would be utterly unable to perceive the most obvious implications of the affair.

But in addition to these general reasons the *Cher Vieux* had a purely personal one for disliking the thought of Adelaide in connection with his friend. She was a *foreigner*, than which, in his eyes, scarcely anything could have been more damning. He was himself a foreigner, that is to say he was the son of one, his father having been an expatriated Alsatian: yet, being on the maternal side English and having been educated at an English Public School and University, he could be fiercely the Englishman. Both the English and the Alsatian sides of Victor Plarr combined to dislike the foreigner, the former on principle, the latter because it knew him too well. He could be most uncompromising on this subject, being frequently heard to observe, "From Cadiz to Odessa everyone is much of a

muchness," by which you were meant to infer that even the best of them, with, of course, radiant exceptions, were slightly underbred, and that they had the vices of underbreeding, such as meanness in money matters and taking too few baths.

Furthermore, he did not like small Soho restaurants because they were cheap, he being of those who seldom use the word *cheap* without its complementary *nasty*. But then he was not a townsman. He loved the country and the things of the country, so that districts like Soho, which specially represent town life, made no appeal to him. Even the atmosphere, therefore, in which Adelaide Foltinowicz was obliged to pass her days lacked for him the lure it held for Dowson, who was a townsman to the tips of his toes.

Then again, although you might be in love, you must not be too *much* in love. *Est modus in rebus*. Above all, you must not make too much talk about it. There was always a likelihood, if you did, that people would put you down as *erotic*. That was not a nice word, nor a nice thing to think about, and far from a nice thing to be. It was a condition that had lately come over from France along with a lot of other things that would perhaps have been better left on the other side of the Channel.

When you came to think of it the dear fellow had shown a good many symptoms of being in this condition. There was that poem of his

addressed to Cynara, from which the most unfortunate conclusions could be drawn if it fell into the hands of the wrong people. But it was all part and parcel of this accursed French phase, or rather *pseudo*-French phase, for, heaven knew, the French were an essentially decent people when it came to matters of sex. It was only certain of their writers . . . But with Dowson it didn't fit. He was peculiarly English. Let him remain so. Nothing was more unendurable than to see the vices of Paris being misinterpreted by an Englishman. Here was a typical, dreamy, charming undergraduate, of the better sort. It was a pity he spent so much of his time in that deplorable little place in Sherwood Street. That kind of thing would undermine anyone. . . .

* * * * *

Dowson, meanwhile, was not bothering about what other people thought. His fellow men had always seemed to him somewhat shadowy and unsubstantial and now they appeared to be rather more so than before. Moreover, he seemed in addition to be enveloped in a translucent golden vapour, so that he was not even able to see them very clearly: and the name of this vapour, he thought, was *happiness*, but he couldn't be sure.

Just about now he dispatched a good many letters to Plarr.

"I am becoming far too absorbed," he wrote, "to do anything but sit, in Poland, and gather the exquisite moments. For, to quote *mes derniers:*

'The wisdom of the world said unto me:
"*Go forth and run, the race is to the brave;*
Perchance some honour tarrieth for thee!"
"As tarrieth," I said, "for sure, the grave."
For I had pondered on a rune of roses,
Which to her votaries the moon discloses.

'The wisdom of the world said: "*There are bays:*
Go forth and run, for victory is good,
After the stress of the laborious days."
"Yet," said I, "shall I be the worms' sweet food?"
As I went musing on a rune of roses,
Which, in her hour, the pale, soft moon discloses.

'Then said my voices: "*Wherefore strive or run,*
On dusty highways ever, a vain race?
The long night cometh, starless, void of sun,
What light shall serve thee like her golden face?"
For I had pondered on a rune of roses,
And knew some secrets which the moon discloses.

"'Yea,' said I, 'for her eyes are pure and sweet
As lilies, and the fragrance of her hair
Is many laurels; and it is not meet
To run for shadows when the prize is here.'
And I went reading in that rune of roses
Which to her votaries the moon discloses.'"

* * * * *

After a time it was borne in on him that his love had thrown itself out into space like a rainbow and was seeking that other cloud upon which Adelaide must surely be. For lovers and poets, or, rather, lovers who are also poets, think in terms of natural phenomena, which is only to be expected, since love is the greatest phenomenon of them all.

Nevertheless, there were times when Dowson descended from his cloud and, half emerging from his golden vapour, wrote to his friend Plarr:

"I have not seen anyone very lately—until a few days ago, that is—not so much for any ailment as for a great lack of energy that has come over me, and my great absorption otherwhere.

"The situation in Poland remains virtually unchanged: except that, I think, a sort of tacit understanding establishes itself better and more securely every day. And for *Das Mädchen* She has never been more intimately charming: I

become almost sanguine, although of course there are all the other difficulties still to be surmounted. It is useless to make plans however, it will arrange itself some way or other."

It would seem, therefore, that rainbows, which are, after all, bridges, if intangible ones, need various kinds of stanchions and rivets if they are not to collapse into the void. So, seeking about for objects of the sort that should be made of some indestructible material, Dowson bethought him of Religion. Adelaide was a Catholic. The bridge that would reach her cloud would be a Catholic bridge, and he who set out to cross it would be a Catholic lover.

Once upon a time, not so long ago in actual time-measurement, he had been what is commonly called an Unbeliever. He had looked into Christianity and found it historically incorrect, the record of its adherents bloodthirsty and terrible, its dogma absurd, its teachings superfluous. If he had been told that within a measure of months only he would become a convert to Rome he would have laughed aloud in scorn.

But from his place on the cloud he had perceived in one tremendous flash of inner vision that no man is capable of independent thought, that all Faiths are the same, and that Man is one. It was not therefore in the least difficult to become a Roman Catholic. That was what you

called yourself, but you were asking the same question as everyone else and, like everyone else, receiving the answer that seemed to you appropriate.

Meanwhile, upon the faces of those shadows that were his friends, especially upon those of Victor Plarr and the students of medicine, could be observed a certain sadness mingled with contempt.

"Anthropomorphism dwelleth in our midst!" quoth Plarr, who, though very deeply affronted by his friend's conversion, shrank from being too obviously cutting and rested secure in the belief that he wouldn't have the haziest notion what *anthropomorphism* was.

Plarr was right. He hadn't. But it was not only that it was a new word: he hadn't even heard it uttered. He was thinking of Adelaide and of the Absolution and Remission of Sins and the Beatific Vision and the Crown of Thorns and, in fact, of all the lovely and desirable conceptions of Jesuitry.

Unfortunately, from Plarr's point of view, people were just then going over to Rome in shoals. It was, as you might say, the *done thing*. There were Lionel Johnson and Mrs. Meynell, Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde, to name only a few. Of these, Plarr found that Johnson at least was able to produce intellectual reasons for his conversion. Alice Meynell was another intellectual. But Ernest, dear fellow, was in a

vague, wobbly, emotional condition, painful to behold in someone who had hitherto upheld the torch of Reason in company with oneself.

Aloft once more upon that cloud of his: enwrapt in a haze that was, if anything, more golden, Dowson was only dimly aware that Plarr was annoyed with him. What was much more important was that his bridge seemed so far strengthened as to look as if it would one day bear his weight. It was no use setting out though until it had found the other cloud. That only meant being hurled into outer space.

CHAPTER VII

ERNEST DOWSON and Victor Plarr were fellow members of a literary club that called itself The Rhymers and that met, mostly, at the "Cheshire Cheese."

Plarr was keen on literary clubs. He had founded the Lovelace Society at Oxford, believing that since the *Philistines* would die rather than give encouragement to the budding poet, the poets must band themselves together in sheer self-defence.

They were serious these Rhymers, as befitted their calling, and modest, as could be seen from their name. They had it in their minds to publish at intervals selections of their most accomplished work in volume form and to call these volumes simply "The Book of the Rhymers' Club," and then the Second Book and the Third Book and so on, the poems to be chosen by a committee.

At their ordinary meetings they each read one or two of their latest poems and quaffed a little ale and felt Bardic or Elizabethan or modern French, according to individual temperament, while set out on the table in front of each one of them was a long, slender clay pipe, of the kind

known as "churchwarden," which everyone felt, whatever else they didn't agree about, to be rather "jolly."

For there were matters in which they were not altogether of one mind, these poets. There were, for instance, those who wanted to tap the future and those who wanted to stick to the past, and those again who rather thought that it would be worth while to have a shot at both. So you got the Parties of the Left, of the Right and of the Centre, as well as an Independent or two.

Somehow or other the reading aloud of poetry does not tend to produce a very convivial atmosphere. There is about it an austerity, a solemnity even, not to speak of the fear of treading on the other fellow's corns. For, of course, all the verse that was read at these meetings was not of equal merit. Some was really quite poor.

"I think," observed Victor Plarr, speaking, as he sometimes did, out of the secret places of his mind, "that it's a pity we no longer know how to *quaff*."

"But I thought that was just what we were doing," put in an Elizabethan.

"It's not my idea of quaffing," said Plarr. "Now I should say that those merry old fellows in the pictures of Franz Hals are quaffers. Perhaps it can't be attained without long hair and a slight air of debauchery."

"We ought to sing in chorus, at the same time banging our tankards on the table," cried

Arthur Cecil Hillier, an amiable soul, who believed in backing people up.

"It's an absurd word," said Ernest Dowson in a low voice. "I quaff, thou quaffest, he quaffs. . . . It's one of those words that becomes quite intolerably ridiculous as you say it over to yourself."

"Most words do," remarked Le Gallienne flippantly.

"Oh, come!" objected Plarr, laughing.

"In this case it's the double eff," said Dowson, and he continued to mutter such words as "fluff, tiff, buff, muff, cuff . . ." as though hoping that some new and unexpected beauty might in the end be made to emerge from them.

"It's an entirely inadequate word wherewith to express a noble action," cried Lionel Johnson. "I could, at the present moment, for instance, consume the most copious draughts of usquebaugh."

"This is a degenerate age, my dear Lionel," sighed Plarr. "To think that English genius from Shakespeare onwards has been nourished on the bottle, yet now our friend the Bobby awaits our exit from this place . . ."

"Isn't it time we got on with the business of the meeting?" enquired an anonymous voice from somewhere down the table.

"High time!" agreed another, with an unmistakable note in it of disapprobation.

Everything at these meetings was done as far as possible in alphabetical order, which meant that Dowson should have read his poems first: but he suffered from what was felt, in his case, to be a hyper-modest objection to reading out loud in the presence of a large gathering. When any of their number was beset by this failing it was Johnson who was called upon to read in their place, for he, in spite of being the possessor of a curiously high-pitched voice, was able to produce a sonorous and scholarly effect that was very soothing to the author whose work he happened to be reading at the moment.

"I watched the glory of her childhood change,
Half-sorrowful to find the child I knew
(Loved long ago in lily-time)
Become a maid, mysterious and strange,
With fair, pure eyes—dear eyes, but not the
eyes I knew
Of old, in the olden time! . . ."

Dowson's own eyes meanwhile had taken on their most distant and unfocussed look, so that he did not see the way in which several of his fellow poets exchanged glances as these words sounded through the room.

Johnson went on to the next manuscript in his hands and read:

"Calm, sad, secure; behind high convent walls,
These watch the sacred lamp, these watch and pray:
And it is one with them when evening falls,
And one with them the cold return of day . . ."

at the end of which the poets applauded and the reader himself could be heard to utter the one word—"Exquisite!"

Johnson's own turn came next. He was very small. Standing against the table he looked the veriest boy. "Little Johnson," he was sometimes called.

"Sombre and rich, the skies;
Great glooms, and starry plains.
Gently the night wind sighs;
Else a vast silence reigns. . . ."

There were twelve more verses, the subject being the statue of King Charles the First at Charing Cross.

Upon Plarr's face could now be observed a fixed but very polite smile. This was the third poem that had been read, and all three had dealt with subjects that had made his gorge rise. The first two were by a very dear friend, the third by a man for whose mind and attainments he had the very highest possible admiration, yet the first was once again about that little nonentity of a Pole, the second dealt with

superstition in the form of nun-worship, and the third, though very fine, was a eulogy of that truly wretched creature, Charles the First. Meanwhile, over there, on the other side of the table, sat Arthur Symons, who maintained that poems could be about anything on earth, from prostitutes to powder-puffs; but he, Plarr, didn't agree with him.

Next came Richard Le Gallienne. Dear, beautiful, romantic Le Gallienne, whom everyone loved, with his aureole of raven locks. He read his work himself.

"What of the darkness? Is it very fair?
Are there great calms and find ye silence there?
Like soft-shut lilies all your faces glow
With some strange peace our faces never know,
With some great faith our faces never dare.
Dwells it in Darkness? Do ye find it there? . . ."

The poets were silent a moment when he had finished, pondering the meaning of the words they had just heard. There were those who accused Le Gallienne of mere *prettiness*, saying that *beauty* implied more imaginative thought and faith than he possessed. Was that true? Johnson even went so far as to say that he belittled things by his touch, that he prattled and chattered, thinking that by doing so he was being natural, and that in dread of the academic he became impertinent. Others, again, thought

him the only true poet there. He certainly *looked* a poet. Even in an age of luxuriant hair his was noticeably ornate.

Plarr said: "I think we must all agree that we have just listened to a very lovely thing, but I move that in future a levy of sixpence be imposed by the club upon every mention of the word *lily*, singular or plural. We are in danger of limiting ourselves to too few metaphors in these days."

There was an oppressive silence, broken only by Hillier, who cried "Hear, hear!" But that didn't help much, because Hillier carried very little weight.

Plarr thought: "They don't like it, but I don't care. It's time somebody lit a candle on behalf of sanity and balance. This incessant use of a single word or image is a bad sign of mental fatigue and must be combated tooth and nail."

"It's you next, Plarr," said a voice.

He rose, feeling rather shaky. He had brought with him a little thing he had thrown off in a mood of exasperation with the popular cant over the recent death of a well-known actress. He didn't care much about it, but it would have to do if he were to read at all.

"Stand not uttering sedately
Trite oblivious praise above her!
Rather say you saw her lately
Lightly kissing her last lover. . . ."

"I like that," said Le Gallienne generously, when he had done. He was always quick to forgive. "What have you called it?"

"Oh, 'Epitaphium Citharistriae,' I thought. But it's only a trifle—*vers de société*."

"It's good," said Symons; "so entirely of to-day."

"A Greek epigram," added a voice from the direction of the Right.

"I confess I prefer this," said Plarr, and proceeded to recite with considerable emotion:

"The golden river-reach afar
Kisses the golden skies of even,
And there's the first faint lover's star
Alight along the walls of heaven.

The river murmurs to the boughs,
The boughs make music each to each,
And still an amorous west wind soughs
And loiters down the lonesome reach.

And here on the slim arch that spans
The rippling stream in dark outline,
You see the poor old fisherman's
Bowed form and patient rod and line.

A picture better than all art,
Since none can catch that sunset stain,
Or set in the soft twilight's heart
This small strange touch of human pain!"

"Yes," thought Dowson, looking across at his friend, "you can see the fisherman as a symbol of the thwarted heart of Man, but I believe nothing would induce you to look inside him. We're different, you and I . . ." and he brooded a little upon the isolation in which we all stand.

In the meantime Ernest Rhys was reading a toast he had written for the club. This contained the lines:

"As they, we drink defiance
To-night to all but Rhyme,
And most of all to Science,
And all such skins of lions
That hide the ass of time. . . ."

"Poor old Science!" said Victor Plarr.

But before controversy could arise Johnson signed to Arthur Symons, who proceeded to give them his "Javanese Dancers":

"Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums,
Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting;
And now the stealthy dancer comes
Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling . . ."

which disquieted not a few of those present with its suggestion of being in *vers libre* despite its obvious rhymes.

The club was falling into the wrong hands, thought Plarr. If they didn't look out they would have that horrid *poseur* Oscar Wilde becoming

one of them. For his part he was prepared to oppose this to the length of dying in the last ditch. These beastly Æsthetes were beginning to make of the movement a laughing-stock for the still more beastly Philistine. Poetry would sink lower and lower in the public mind, till in the end it would cease to exist. Thinking of this and the *decadents* and *fin de siéclism* and one thing and another, Plarr positively writhed as he sat.

However at that moment there arose one of the Independents, the Voice of Ireland, William Butler Yeats.

"I will arise and go now, and go to Inisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. . . ."

"Good!"
"First rate!" } cried an assortment of voices.
"Very fine!"

* * * * *

It was not only in the realms of literature that the renaissance was taking place. The visual arts and music were also undergoing a revival, but whereas the former were pressing forward under the ægis of the French Impressionists,

the latter had all the appearance of stepping back. While in the studios the talk was all of Cézanne, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, and of what a significant colour yellow was, the musicians were delving away in the British Museum and unearthing the most fascinating old stuff. Here was none of your robust, elaborately orchestrated music, but the bleaker and more etiolated kind: and it had to be played on the old instruments. Really, to give it its proper flavour it ought to be played in the old dress.

Dowson and his friend Plarr were not musical. True, Plarr could sometimes be heard to play with one finger on the pianoforte a descriptive piece called "Rousseau's Dream," which seemed to hold for him depths of charm undiscoverable by his hearers. But then he had to the full the poetic faculty for extracting all there is to be had from association. After all—*Rousseau!*—and the philosopher would seem as he dreamed to be in pastoral mood. Otherwise he thought of music with bitterness as an interruption to conversation.

"Many famous men have been unmusical," observed Dowson thoughtfully.

"I know of Doctor Johnson," said Plarr. "Who else?"

"It was Gautier, wasn't it, who spoke of it as 'the most disagreeable of sounds'?"

"On the other hand there was Milton,

who played the organ like an angel — and Pepys . . ."

"Ah, that reminds me—Horne has another of his seventeenth-century concerts to-morrow night."

"Damn and blast!" exclaimed Plarr, going hastily to his mantelpiece as he spoke to verify this. Yes, there sure enough was a programme for Saturday evening, the nineteenth of March, eighteen-ninety-two. "Listen, my dear man," he said, and proceeded to read out:

1. Fantazie for Six Viols and Harpsichord.
   Richard Deeringe, 1610

2. Fantazie for Three Viols, being the first in a set of twenty-one.
   John Jenkins, *c.* 1650

3. Song, "Gather your Rosebuds," accompanied by the Lute. The words by Rob. Herrick.
   William Lawes, *c.* 1640

4. Fantazie for Five Viols.
   John Jenkins, *c.* 1650

5. Suite No. II, in D major, for Four Viols.
   Matthew Locke, *c.* 1660

6. Song, "The Primrose," accompanied by the Lute. The words by Rob. Herrick.
   Henry Lawes, *c.* 1650

7. Divisions on a Ground, No. V, in D major, for the Viol da Gamba, accompanied by the Harpsichord.
Christopher Simpson, *c.* 1650

Interval

8. Suite for Two Viols and the Lute.
I, Symphony; II, Ayre; III, Jigg; IV, Saraband.
William Lawes, *c.* 1640

9. Solo for the Harpsichord, "St. Thomas Wake," from "Parthenia."
I, Preludio; II, Pavana; III, Galliard.
Dr. John Bull, 1611

10. Song, "A Willow Garland," accompanied by the Lute.
Henry Lawes, *c.* 1650

11. Sonata, No. I, in G major, for Viola da Gamba and Harpsichord.
I, Adagio; II, Allegro ma non tanto; III, Andante; IV, Allegro Moderato.
J. S. Bach, 1753

12. Sonata for Viola d'Amore, Viola da Gamba, and Harpsichord.
I, Adagio; II, Allegro Sarabanda; III, Allegro assai.
Jean Marie Leclair, 1750

"I am pledged to attend, but it will be for a short time only," said Dowson, puffing calmly away at his cigar, "for at a quarter to eleven I shall have to repair to Charing Cross to meet the Club Train from Calais, which is bringing me a pair of French *lune de mielistes* who speak no English and will require a hotel."

"But this accursèd concert's timed to begin at half-past eight."

"I must allow myself plenty of time to get to the station," rejoined Dowson, with an enigmatic smile.

"This is base on your part, my dear Ernest. I foresee an evening of excruciating boredom."

"Why go?"

"It's as much as one's life's worth to be thought unmusical in these days."

"It may not be so bad. I heard mention of Herrick, did I not? And after all harpsichords and lutes and so forth can be distinctly jolly."

"Music reminds me of delirium," said Plarr. "It goes on and on and is perfectly meaningless."

"But it's said to be so full of meaning."

"How can sound, apart from language, convey ideas? You might as well contend that a dog could propound a problem of Euclid with its bark."

"But take Wagner, for instance," cried Dowson, waxing enthusiastic. "Look at 'The Flying Dutchman.' You can positively *hear* the storm. . . ."

"Yes, but no composer can make you hear the discussion we're having now."

"I've no doubt you're right, but I adore Wagner."

"So do I," admitted Plarr, descending from his logical position. "The 'Ride of the Walkyries.' . . . Splendid! What a poet the man is."

"'Die Meistersinger' appeals to me enormously."

"That's the one I care for least. It's so *German!* By the way, did I ever tell you what an old Scotswoman of our acquaintance says of Wagner? . . . 'Hoots, toots! there's a wee bit tuney and then—poom!—bang!'—But that's what I feel about nearly all music."

"I like the music that springs directly from the heart of a people," observed Dowson, thinking of the musicalness of the Poles.

"Ah yes, the 'Marseillaise'. . . . Magnificent! I never can hear it without tears."

"And those simple folk-tunes that have been sung for generations. Don't they move you?"

"Yes, but I don't like the word 'folk.' It smacks of this modern pose of ultra-simplicity. Yet it's useful. . . . Where I think music is permissible is among the bards. I like to think of the old fellows with their harps. As a matter of fact the harp is my favourite instrument. That and the bagpipe. Did you ever hear a *pibroch?* In the Celtic countries music is the handmaid of poetry, which is as it should be.

In England the poet is looked upon as merely absurd. He's like the weakest boy in the Public School—gets all the kicks."

"Yes," agreed Dowson, "quite a bad musician is regarded with sympathy, whereas a poet has to be stupendous—a Tennyson or a Browning—before he's even tolerated."

"Yet, this is the country, *par excellence*, of poets."

At that the friends sat and looked at one another for some seconds in a kind of stupefaction.

"I wonder," said Dowson at length, "if any band of musicians has ever had to endure what the poor old Rhymers have just been through at the hands of Andrew Lang?"

"No, of course not. Music is sacrosanct. 'A ransom of five shillings seems rather exorbitant for their combined efforts . . .' Do you remember? And—'A glance at Mr. Traill's Directory of Minor Poets will show that his sixty have received some additions to their numbers. . . . A man must be either a very great poet or a very conceited person who, in middle age, can find any excuse for his own lyrical performances. How thin, how imitative, how superfluous they seem; twitterings of an ignorant young bird on the sonorous Helicon of England. . . .' Good, that!" concluded Plarr bitterly.

"I perceive you have it by heart."

"I've gone to some pains to acquire it, because it seems to me the epitome of the Philistine attitude, and it has just the little extra tang that makes it impayable by reason of its having been written by a man who was once himself a poet, though perhaps a somewhat *minor* one."

"Of course one must admit," said Dowson temperately, "there was some pretty bad verse in the book. I for one make a most indifferent showing. It's difficult to guess upon what grounds the committee made their choice."

"What I can't stand about the musical," observed Plarr, whose thoughts had reverted to the coming concert, "is that they're so *goulu*. Suppose we were to get up and recite our verse, or anybody's, for two or three hours on end . . ."

"No one would listen!"

"Exactly!"

CHAPTER VIII

ONE night upon leaving the "Cheshire Cheese" after a meeting of the Rhymers Dowson heard following footsteps and the voice of Lionel Johnson saying "Wait for me, my dear fellow."

Together they turned up a deserted Chancery Lane.

Johnson had much to say. Especially and surprisingly was he eloquent to-night on the subject of marriage, his view being that a man should seek, above all, to mate with his intellectual equal.

"When one loves," said Dowson gently, "intellect ceases to play any very great part in one's calculations," and he smiled to himself in the semi-gloom.

"But *love* has a way of ceasing."

"I am not at all sure," observed Dowson, pursuing the trend of his own thoughts, "that there is not some power in all of us that is entirely independent of the quality of one's mind."

"Perhaps I had better have used the word *cultivation* rather than *intellect*."

"But so few women are cultivated in your sense of the word—or men either, for that matter."

"Oh, surely . . ."

There was a pause during which Dowson thought of the wives and daughters of the Dons who had been at Oxford in his time. They were intellectual, or cultivated, or both. His smile deepened.

Suddenly Johnson ceased to trot round and round his subject in the manner of a Red Indian round an encampment of American pioneers.

"I suppose you are aware that I am thinking of Plarr. I am told he is contemplating marriage. Now it seems to me that there you have a man of unusual intellectual content. He is delightful, don't you think? I see him as a kind of half-French, half-Celtic Austin Dobson, with the past, dying traditions and wild races for his theme. Perhaps it would be better were he not to marry at all. Constant association with a mind of lesser calibre than one's own . . ."

"Yet is it not love," began Dowson in his soft, rather broken voice, "that makes poets?"

"*Some* poets."

Johnson's voice held a kind of sad, gentle reproach, as of one slightly smirched angel for another. You couldn't be angry. You might ask yourself what right he had to comment upon Plarr's affairs, or to think about them at all, and

the answer was that no one had more right, since he appreciated his fellow men so fully.

"I cannot see why, because a woman doesn't know Greek, one should infer that she is necessarily of lesser intellectual calibre to oneself. *I* don't know any Greek, or precious little."

"Oh, come, my dear fellow, you know what I mean perfectly well."

"It seems to me," said Dowson, "that if one were to follow your precepts one not only wouldn't marry, but couldn't if one would. You must remember . . . " he paused.

"*What* must one remember?"

"That you can't *help* loving a particular person. Love is a force beyond one's control—as—as irresistible as Niagara."

Johnson ignored this, thinking, no doubt, that it was of altogether too trite a nature to merit a reply. Dowson regretted having used a simile so banal as that large colonial waterfall, but he had been able to think of no other that so aptly conveyed what he felt.

"It has been very forcibly borne in on me of late," observed Johnson at last, "that this business of marrying outside one's own particular world will lead to the speedy break-up of society."

"Well—would that matter enormously? If it is simply built up on snobbery . . ."

"I am not persuaded that *snobbery* is the word."

"Well, shall we say the aristocratic ideal? In other words, the fear that, supposing your grandfather is a nobody, someone will discover the fact."

"But as it happens everybody's grandfather is *not* a nobody," objected Johnson. "Surely you agree that the question of race is an important one. I mean in the sense of family —breeding—pedigree?"

"I don't know," said Dowson. "Can you ever be certain about such things? . . ." and then, suddenly, irrelevantly, he thought of what a very *small* person it would have to be that Johnson married, if with his views he ever married at all. She would have to be very little more than a midget if she were not to overtop her brilliant husband. An intellectual, cultivated, aristocratic midget.

"I am thinking of the children," said Johnson firmly. "Will they not be hopelessly *déclassé?* I fear so."

"It seems to me, on the other hand," returned Dowson valiantly, "that they may be all the better as men and women for knowing how the other half of the world lives—and thinks."

"If it *does* think."

Dowson was aware of fatigue. He coughed a little and turned up the collar of his coat.

"It is all so wild, so foolish, so undisciplined," murmured Johnson. "But only one more sign of the age in which we live."

"You don't care for the present epoch. I find it immeasurably exciting."

"I know you do, my dear fellow," said Johnson sadly. "I know you do."

* * * * *

The next morning Dowson felt utterly miserable. He had not slept well and there was one of those slight yet sinister fogs that enter the nose and throat with a particularly choking effect. A fog like this always gave him a cold in the head of a kind that he found difficult to shake off. With a sore throat and a running nose the East End appeared to him an even more detestable place than usual.

Looking out over the grey waters of Limehouse Reach, he composed a letter to Plarr.

"Johnson spoke to me yesterday—we were coming from the Rhymers—and of your matter—is it then now publicly announced or did you reveal it to him?—in a tone which corroborated my opinion that he would be also my most hostile critic.

"I confess, however, that I have long passed the point at which one is seriously moved by hostile criticism of anybody in these questions or can feel any more than a tolerant contempt for the point of view from which it is uttered. To take the world so seriously! *Enfin c'est trop bête!* God or the Flesh or the Devil, an artist

may be in bondage to any one or other or all of these Powers and retain his self-respect—but the World mustn't positively *Must* not exist for him—or so much the worse for his Art. *Cher Poète je vous embrasse.*"

Bold words these! For Johnson was looked upon by his contemporaries as an intellectual colossus and an absolute authority upon all things on earth and in heaven. As a critic he was spoken of in the same breath as Sainte Beuve, and he not yet thirty! Then he was capable of such exquisite work himself, a rare thing in a critic, and, which was rarer still, had the most extraordinary power of recognising genius in other men. Sympathetic he was, therefore, and generous. You felt that you could have taken any amount of adverse criticism from such a man. Not that you often got it. What was so delightful about Johnson was that his enthusiasms were backed by so warm a heart that they were sometimes very nearly in danger of running away with him. Very nearly, but not quite. He was always able to stop the stampede in time. He was amazingly balanced.

Yourself apart, the man wrote magnificently and his knowledge was staggering. You simply couldn't catch him out in a matter of erudition. There were those who complained that there was a certain coldness about his style. Nonsense! Dignity, yes, and power. In these days of the halfpenny press people were for ever clamouring

for the meretricious, for superficial stuff that should tickle the palate. But Johnson was solid. As someone truly put it: "One could read his sentences for their majesty conceivably without being interested in the things of which he wrote." Very well!

But the same writer went on to say: "He was overweighted with the things of the spirit and the intellect, childishly little, with the face of a child-saint who has also been a martyr and learned immortal things, a gliding step that hardly touched earth, a shadowy presence that was of us, yet not of us. Once, in his beloved Ireland, a motherly nun, taking him for fifteen, rebuked him for keeping the hours of grown men. 'But I am twenty-seven,' he remonstrated. 'I don't care what age you are,' she answered, this true daughter of Erin; 'but whatever age you are you do not look it.' She was wrong, however. His austere, delicate little face with the magnificent brows was too immortally wise to belong to the very young on this earth. . . . His poetry was, like himself, delicate, austere, spiritual—yes, snow-white! that is the word that comes to me and will not be rejected. . . . It is himself, with that something *snow-white* like his poetry, which the world and the years had no power to smirch . . ." and so on.

What would seem to have escaped the people of the 'nineties is that a man of twenty-seven who can be taken for a boy of fifteen is in all probability

the victim of one of those glandular freaks that result in arrested sexual development. Very likely he was *snow-white*. "He had the monastic temperament," pursues his panegyrist, "and he ought to have been a recluse in a mediæval monastery, dedicating his gifts to the honour and glory of God. . . ." However, he was far from being immured in any monkish institution and was engaged in writing a book on the art of Thomas Hardy.

At the same time, very possibly because of that premised physical shortcoming of his, he had begun to drink very heavily, and the opinions of those who drink must in any case be taken with reserve, not only on account of the ultimate clouding of the intellect which is one of the results of the habit, but because it produces an excessive conventionality of mind with regard to the slightest irregularity of conduct in anyone else.

Nevertheless, Johnson frightened them. He not only had this enormously powerful intellect, but he had a way, a very gentle, aristocratic and negative way, of making you feel just an ordinary vulgar sort of fool. *Vulgar*—that was the word. The most dreaded word in the entire dictionary. No, stop, wait a minute—there was that other—*erotic*. It was a question which was the more devastating, the more to be avoided as a label for oneself. You felt that if Johnson ever got so far as to allow himself to call you either

—not to your face, of course, he would never do that, but you might be sure someone would let you know it had been said—you would feel, temporarily at least, that there was not very much more to live for. He could actually make you feel like that. He was frightening in the way that only those people, who, while appearing to understand a thing, in fact do not, can be frightening.

In the circumstances it was not at all agreeable for Plarr to learn that not only had Johnson found out that he was contemplating marriage, but that the knowledge had aroused the Johnsonian disapproval. However, after a very short pause for reflection as to the issues involved, he decided to brave it out. Dowson, too, did not see why, since they had found the most wonderful thing life has to offer, they should treat it as a matter for shame, but he was anxious to clear himself of the slightest imputation of tale-bearing. In answer to a distinctly reproachful letter from Plarr he wrote:

"Your letter surprises me. Yes! it certainly surprises me. Please believe me also guiltless of any indiscretion: Johnson spoke first to me, and from his manner I assumed that you had yourself told him of these things. That he should have fathomed me also is sufficiently overwhelming! You are wrong, however, in assuming that he differently damns us. No,

we are bracketed—and I perceive now that his criticisms of your insanity were indirectly meant for mine—and I think it is not of vulgarity, of *banalité*, that he accuses us, as much as of being impracticable and foolish and irresponsible. As you say, however, what does it matter?—since to-morrow one dies!

"The criticism of one's friends—'rumores senum severiorum.' *Allons donc!* No—

'Non ego nunc tristes vereor, mea Cynthia, Manes,
Nec moror extremo debita fata rogo:
Sed, ne forte tuo careat mihi funus amore,
Hic timor est ipsis durior exequiis.'*"

Well, there it was. Johnson had discovered everything. *How* he had done so was beside the point: what was more important was that it looked as though he were going to be unsympathetic about it. However, Plarr was able to explain the reason for this, after a fashion.

"It's the tribal spirit," he said. "We all of us feel more or less the same thing about the men and women our friends want to marry. Miss Jones, who is one of us, is going to marry

* "Sweet one, I fear not now the ghostly state,
Nor would I hinder what I owe to fate!
But lest thy love desert me on my pyre,
'Tis this I fear more than the funeral fire."
(*Propertius*, Elegy XIX, Book I.
Translated by Victor Plarr.)

Jones, who is one of us, is going to marry Brown, who isn't. A poor fellow, Brown! We shan't bother to find out if he has anything in him because he almost certainly hasn't. In fact, we'll damn him at a venture. We shan't even look at him very closely—he's so sure to be ugly. If you notice, Brown's fellow tribesmen take care to sit on the other side of the church from ours at the wedding. By the way, I have just been reading that the Australian black man . . ."

But at this point Dowson ceased to listen very closely. Plarr was always reading some book or other about aborigines.

The worst of inhabiting a cloud is the appalling ease with which you can be dislodged from your habitation. The slightest jerk and hey presto! there you are down on earth, where the most disturbing things can happen.

During one of these temporary descents Dowson perceived that there were others beside Johnson to whom Adelaide appeared in an unfavourable light. He would take his friends to the restaurant that they might see for themselves how wonderful his darling was, and, without being told, without being able to say even how he knew, he was aware that they saw only the illusion of an illusion. He began to think that there might be something in that theory of Plarr's. Adelaide was a foreigner, a member, therefore, of another *tribe* in a peculiarly actual

sense. A Pole—a nobody—a woman: not even that—a child. Absurd! Not worth troubling about. Yes, that probably did approximate to their mental processes.

If he was ever the least little bit inclined to be hurt by this lack of enthusiasm on the part of his friends he was able to reflect how very much better it was that they should regard her with indifference. Supposing he had had to sit by while men, who might well be more brilliant and attractive than himself, had looked at his darling with admiration, appreciation, or desire? He couldn't have borne it, simply. Moreover, the fact that this was not so proved conclusively that what he saw in Adelaide was only for his eyes. Here, thank God, was no blatant crowded temple at which the multitude worshipped, but a secret shrine, a hidden loveliness, to which he alone possessed the key!

CHAPTER IX

IN the August of eighteen-ninety-two Plarr was married.

Dowson did not go to the wedding because he happened to be in Brittany with his friend and collaborator, Arthur Moore; but it was understood that they would all be foregathering quite soon, for it was to Brittany that the Plarrs were going for their honeymoon.

The north-west corner of France had lately come very much into evidence as a place for a holiday—if you weren't too fussy about sanitation, that was—for the dear delightful Bretons were the Chouans of a hundred years ago and less, and if you hurried up you would still be able to catch one or two very old men to whom Quiberon was more than a name. These veterans still wore their charming old dress with their hair down to their waists, and could make the noise of the little owl, the *chouette*, from which came that nickname of theirs, Chouan. And Quiberon was one of the great romantic tragedies of history, like Culloden.

Then if you weren't so keen on immediate history, but liked to go further back, this was a

country that had been one of the headquarters of Druidism. It had been steeped in it. And now it was as great a stronghold of Catholicism. It had been the merest step, as it were, from Druidism to Christianity, and, really, you were not so sure that in the more remote places the step had been entirely complete.

But Dowson was not interested in the Bretons because they were living examples for the comparative religionist, nor did he think of a massacre as picturesque because it had happened some time ago. He was singularly lacking in the power that enables mankind to divide the events of one epoch from another in this way. What he saw was a people devout, hard-working, superstitious, above all, companionable. Peasants, in fact, like the Poles.

The Bretons, in their turn, were very much taken with Dowson. True, they found his name difficult to pronounce, being unable in most cases to get any nearer to it than *Douzeuc*, which in their language means *twelve*, but that only served to add to the general merriment, while he, for his part, found it pleasant that they should want to possess some means, however inaccurate, of identifying him in their minds.

Dowson was almost happy in Brittany. It seemed to him a land in which an artist might lead a very nearly ideal life. The food was cheap; the climate neither too hot nor too cold; you could be simple and natural. He was sure that

Adelaide would like it too. At Faouët, in Morbihan, on the left-hand side of the market-place, looking east from the Lion d'Or, was a house in which, so he told himself, he and she would one day live, as in a fairy-tale.

Meanwhile, there was Adelaide shut up like any daughter of the East in Sherwood Street. Of the East, did he say? What a thoroughly false simile, for there, in Sherwood Street, Adelaide saw men, many men, every day and always. When he thought of the men she must be seeing he could hardly bear to stay on in Brittany.

"How old do you think a girl should be before she marries?" he enquired of his companion with as impersonal an air as he could command.

"How *young* he means, I suppose," thought his friend. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "It depends. Some girls . . ."

"My mother was barely twenty when I was born," observed Dowson. Twenty! That meant nineteen—eighteen perhaps—another four years. . . . God! But there were girls who married at seventeen—sixteen even. In the 'fifties and 'sixties this had been quite usual.

"*Juliet* was only fourteen," said his companion helpfully.

"So they say. I have always found that impossible to believe—till now."

"Anything's possible in the South. It's the sun. Everything matures early."

"I don't know—isn't it all a question of the convention of the moment? In the time of Elizabeth we in England had child-marriage too. Bacon's wife was only fourteen, while he was, I believe, over thirty."

"Well, I shouldn't think such an arrangement would make for happiness, and that is, after all, the important thing."

"Yes, that is, as you say, the important thing. . . ."

Happiness! Was there such a thing? Was it not a name that man had made for himself, like the word *heaven*, for something that did not exist? Or if it did, was it not for such fleeting moments that the very thought of them became a mockery?

Dowson did not give vent to his sudden attack of gloom, for they were at déjeuner, and his friend was even now eupeptically engaged upon a large grey trout flanked with gouts of thick pale mayonnaise sauce, and it would have been cruel to disturb his obvious enjoyment.

"The Plarrs will like this hotel," said Arthur Moore. "It's the best we've struck so far. When are they due?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"And we're off to-morrow night. What a pity!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

But in his secret heart Dowson was not sure that he wanted to encounter the Plarrs on their wedding journey.

* * * * *

The Dowsons had moved. From Maida Hill they had gone back to Lee, in Kent, where Ernest had been born. The Plarrs, meanwhile, had set up house at Blackheath, which is more or less contiguous to Lee. It followed, therefore, that Ernest should be among the first of their friends to visit the bridal couple.

"Ah, there you are, my dear man," exclaimed Plarr, who had opened the front door himself. "Good! . . . Is that someone waving to you —over there—by those trees?"

"It's my mother. She just came over with me for the walk."

"Won't she come in?"

"No, I don't think so, thanks very much...."

"Are you sure? Shan't I go after her and ask her in? It seems so very inhospitable. . . ."

"I'm sure she won't, thanks all the same. She's rather shy, you know."

"I don't like to see her going off like that into the darkness," said Plarr, and indeed there was something a trifle melancholy about the figure

of Mrs. Dowson as she flitted away in the gathering dusk through a little grove that lined the opposite side of the road.

"She ought to be home before it gets quite dark, I think," said her son, peering after her.

"Well, we're in the same boat," observed Plarr reassuringly. "My mother's at church and, you know, she was seventy on her last birthday. But she's quite wonderful for her age."

"It's curious, isn't it, *my* mother's only forty-five."

"Mine was nearly that before I was born, of course. She can remember the Queen's accession and all sorts of odd and amusing things. But come in, my dear chap. I'll show you the bookroom first."

The room looked charming in the lamplight. It made Ernest think of the darkness outside and his mother on her lonely homeward walk, but he resolutely put the thought aside.

"I find myself admiring your wallpaper inordinately," he said. "One of Morris's, if I'm not mistaken."

"It is."

"One must admit that this formal treatment of the naturalistic is an enormous advance."

"Oh, rather! We've got the same design in the drawing-room, only in yellow. The peacock's feathers are a deep yellow on a paler ground."

"I like this blue. I can't imagine liking anything more."

"We thought you would. But the yellow's exceedingly jolly. You'll see."

They repaired to the drawing-room, where they found the mistress of the house, whose name was Helen, but who was called "Nellie," and then it was impossible to think of things like wallpapers, for she was beautiful, so beautiful that you were put in mind of that other Helen of the Trojan wars. But she had more than beauty, for she said in a low voice, "How is Missie?" Missie, Ernest told her, was in excellent health, but before he could enlarge on the subject, as he was longing to, they were joined by the older Mrs. Plarr, Victor's mother, who was full of the sermon she had just heard.

"I am more convinced than ever," she said solemnly, at the same time removing her bonnet, "that there *is* a personal devil."

Her son laughed. "Delicious thought!"

"Let me take your bonnet and cape for you, mother dear," said her daughter-in-law.

"Ah, pooh!" said the old lady, with whom this was a customary exclamation when something she was wearing became entangled with something else, or at any small mishap. This time it was a sequin that held resolutely to a loop of the silk fringe that edged her cloak.

"I think I see what's happened," said Ernest. "Let me . . ."

"Thank ye, young feller!" said Victor's mother, for she belonged to the generation that so addressed the more youthful members of the male sex. "It's you, isn't it," she continued, "that's interested in Poland?" and she gave young Mr. Dowson an uncommonly sly look.

At that moment they were called to supper, and Victor took the opportunity of saying in a low voice as they went in: "My mother belongs to the epoch that called a spade a spade. She's *pre*-Victorian. You mustn't mind if she . . ."

"Oh, but I don't," protested Ernest. "She's delightful."

Mind, that people should take it for granted that he cared for Adelaide! Of course he didn't.

The talk ran fast and furious after that, for old Mrs. Plarr was a great talker and a little deaf, and the younger people wanted to know what Ernest had thought of Brittany, and everyone laughed a great deal and nobody listened much to anyone else. From time to time someone emerged above the flood and the others, through sheer fatigue, listened awhile.

"I remember," said the old lady during one of these lulls, "how on our way back to Strasbourg after our wedding-trip, Gustave and I spent the night in Nancy. It was bitterly cold weather and I shall never forget the Place

Stanislas sparkling with hoar-frost in the moonlight . . ."

"I was just beginning to think," said her son, "that Nancy seemed a trifle apropos of boots, but, of course, Lorraine was under Polish rule throughout the eighteenth century. Nancy was largely built by Stanislas of Poland. It's an exquisite place—rococo to a degree."

"Talking of exquisite places, didn't you love Faouët?" put in Nellie.

"Yes, isn't it lovely? Do you remember a row of houses near the church? . . ."

"And the lime trees . . ."

"D'you remember those two just outside the hotel? Moore christened them 'The Sisters Limejuice.'"

"Excellent!"

"And the two little girls of seven—twins they were—at the café where they had the billiard table? Moore and I were quite in love with them."

"And Marie-Joseph . . ."

"And Madame Mitouard . . ."

"And Jeanne . . ."

"And Meese Rose, who was said to speak English . . ."

" . . . only she had a sore throat while we were there and so couldn't because, as they explained, English is so guttural."

"My dear husband," pursued old Mrs. Plarr, who wondered what could be making them

laugh so heartily, "used always to say that Poland and Alsace had much in common. Patriotism and love of liberty . . ."

"And the *Judenhetze*, don't forget," said her son dryly.

"Charming this china is. . . ."

"We got it at Morlaix. . . ."

Poland and Alsace-Lorraine and Brittany. This was a house in which Adelaide would find herself at home. Here you could forget too, for once, that you were the interesting literary young man. They had one of their own on the premises and so knew all about the trials and tribulations of the literary life, the agonies of composition, the returned manuscript, the rejection slip. But in any case they were not in the least self-conscious, and they liked you because you were Ernest Dowson and not because some day, far off in the distant future, you were going to be Dowson the poet, or novelist, or master of the *conte*, as the case might be. Not that it wasn't rather agreeable to be looked upon in that way too, sometimes, but it was nice to have a rest. Here there was nothing to live up to, so to speak. You needn't be "brilliant." You could just be yourself.

But he thought that apart from any personal considerations he would still have liked this house of the Plarrs for some quality there was in it of *oddness*. It was difficult to put your finger upon where this lay exactly, but there it was.

Perhaps it was contained in a certain foreignness. The food, that was somehow not quite the usual Sunday evening fare, or the occasional cropping up of some small French custom, such, for instance, as the dipping by old Mrs. Plarr of a lump of sugar in brandy, which she called a "canard." Or the fact that Victor could not pronounce the letter "r," a lingual hiatus that made him say many of his words in a way that was reminiscent of Adelaide. Or the rather coarse but ample table-linen, that was obviously not new for the bride, but that had come from some copious ancestral store. It was all of these things, and it was perhaps also the fact that they always knew what you meant when you said anything out of the ordinary. They were not easily startled and they didn't stare at you in a shocked way if you made a remark that might be considered advanced. In fact, they were friendly and easy-going and you felt at home with them.

He thought, too, how admirable was this foreign way of having one's mother to live with one after marriage. It made it so much pleasanter for the outsider, who, had she not been there, would have felt somewhat *de trop* with the newly married couple. In fact, with her there, and surrounded by her furniture and possessions, it was difficult to believe that the Plarrs had only been back from their honeymoon for about a fortnight. Indeed, it was only in the drawing-

room after supper, when he caught sight in a mirror of Plarr in the act of delicately kissing the curls at the back of his wife's neck, that he was reminded that these two had been married a matter of but six weeks or so.

CHAPTER X

FOR a long time past it had been plain to everyone that Joseph Foltinowicz was ill. He was always coughing and he had that pinched look, not only of the face, but of the whole body, that denotes wasting diseases like consumption. Then he seemed worried. Everything worried him: the idea of the future, the thought of what had happened in times gone by, the details of the passing day.

At the beginning of eighteen-ninety-three he grew suddenly worse. It was impossible, looking at him, to believe that he would live to see another winter.

Once or twice, when Dowson came into the restaurant, he could see that Missie had been crying.

"My father is so ill," she said, but they did not speak very much about his illness, because what, after all, was there to say? Besides, Dowson did not want to *say* things. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her.

But it was necessary to make some sort of comment, however inadequate, however conventional.

"You have a good doctor. You mustn't worry, Missie. Everything is being done for him."

"Yes, but the doctor can do no good. I am sure it is so. I saw him coming from my father's room and he looked . . ." she broke off, unable, because of her tears, to explain what it was she had seen in the face of the doctor.

"Missie, if there is anything I can do . . ." began Ernest, but what he wanted to say was: "It must all be costing a great deal and I can see how poor you are. I have something—a few pounds, at least . . ." but he knew that it would be no use. She might take money from him because she was still too young to know that a man could not give it to a woman, even if she were in dire trouble, unless there were some tie between them nearer than friendship, nearer than love, but her mother would not.

"You are very kind," she said.

"*Kind!*"

"You are always so kind to me," she continued, looking at him in a sort of wonder.

"I would do anything for you, Missie. You must know that."

"Even to cooking the dinner?" she asked, with a smile.

He smiled back. "I might. There are lots of things I can do that you don't know about."

"I am sure there are," she said seriously. "You are very clever, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, I'm not clever, Missie. I can put words together, but I'm not even sure that I do that very well. Lots of people do it better."

"*I* think you're clever. You always seem to know what I'm thinking anyhow. Besides," she said, "it's a sign of being clever to think that you're not. Isn't that true? Someone told me the other day that when an artist thinks his work is good it is almost sure not to be. I should think it would be the same with being clever. If you think you are you're not."

He said sharply, "Who told you that . . . about art, I mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. People come here who paint and make statues and play the violin and they talk to me sometimes. I like it. They treat me as though I'm grown up."

"Don't *I* treat you as though you're grown up?"

"Yes, *you* do, but lots of people don't. They want me to do grown-up things, but they think I'm silly."

"You're not at all silly, Missie. You're very sensible."

"I don't think I always am. But then grown-up people aren't always, are they? Sometimes they seem to me to do very stupid things."

"Such as . . . ?"

"Well, they get married when they don't really like each other, for one thing."

"Ah, but they don't find that out until after

they're married, you see, and then it's too late . . ."

"I don't think I shall ever do that," said Adelaide.

And Ernest replied: "You must take very good care that you don't, Missie dear!"

* * * * *

It became a problem whether Madame Foltinowicz and her daughter would be able to keep the restaurant open. There was so much to do for the invalid, so much running up and down stairs, and all the things he himself had seen to in the past, the buying, not to speak of the major part of the cooking.

If it had not been for Auguste, the waiter, they didn't know what they would have done. It was he who saved the situation. Though quite young, he tackled each problem as it arose, and if things did not run with exactly the same smoothness as in the old days, they were at least able to pull through without closing altogether.

As is always the case in serious illness, everyone was very kind. Complete strangers rallied to the help of the mother and daughter in a way that was as extraordinary as it was touching. Dowson was for ever encountering people with names like Stutz or Goetz or Grosz, either coming in or going out, and the staircase and

passages rang with German. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but he was able to see their tears. The young woman so soon to be a widow, with the young daughter who would then necessarily be an orphan, were, like themselves, strangers in a strange land—exiles. Naturally they were moved.

Dowson saw very plainly that if he did not assert himself in some way or other he would be lost sight of in the general upheaval. Someone else, one of these foreigners, would be chosen to see to all the things that he, as an Englishman, would be so much better able to cope with. He thought of the things that would have to be done: the registration of the death, the arrangement of the funeral, the proving of the will.

Besides, there was another point, though one upon which he did not allow himself to dwell too much, it was of so horrible a nature, and that was that when Monsieur died Adelaide and her mother might give up the restaurant and go away somewhere, perhaps to Poland. He felt that at all costs this must not be allowed to happen. But the question was how to prevent it? He saw now for the first time in all its stark and dreary plainness what it means to be a poor man. How could he say "It shall be so!" or "I wish this!" when he was without the bank balance wherewith to back up his masculine assertiveness? It was borne in on him at that

moment, if it never had been before, that even in Soho he was a detrimental.

Just about now there arrived most opportunely a letter from the one person who might be able to offer some useful hints in the midst of all this pother, namely, Plarr. Ernest lost no time in answering it, although he was only too well aware that any words that he could write at such a time must be a travesty of what he felt.

"You ask after Her? She has been, I am glad to say, extraordinarily sweet for the last four weeks: so that in spite of my invincible pessimism I begin at last to think that there is, really, beneath her double perversity of *enfant gâtée* and *jeune fille coquette* a solid foundation of affection. She is growing up into a charming girl.

"I should like very much to reveal myself there entirely, especially insomuch as Monsieur's days are very obviously numbered, and before the changes and revolutions which this fact makes one anticipate, I should like to be firmly established. Not, poor man, that I have any ghoulish desires against his length of days. After all he is genial and harmless enough, and I have certainly been treated by him always with a great deal of consideration.

"It is terribly difficult to be explicit, *cher ami!* You were fortunate in that with you the family

necessarily must have come afterwards: with me of course it must be the first step. Explicitly, I mean: because I am no longer in the least doubtful that to Her I am perfectly obvious.

"Forgive me if I bore you: but you are absolutely the only person to whom I can turn for advice or sympathy in these matters: and as these matters now entirely absorb me, I neither write to nor see anybody else unless by accident, and a letter from you, and occasionally writing to you, is a godsend."

"Tiresome if he marries that little creature," thought Plarr. "Why, one hardly notices her. What, indeed, *is* there to notice? A Pole—tiresome people Poles! Why does he bother? What on earth is all this fuss about the family? Good God! they should think themselves honoured. There is a lack of humour nowadays about our dear Ernest. . . ."

"But why shouldn't he marry her if he wants to?" demanded Nellie, for Ernest's letter had arrived by the first post and the Plarrs were at breakfast.

"Because one would prefer that he should marry someone we all like."

"But we might like Missie. Why not?"

It being too early in the morning to enter upon a lengthy explanation of why this was *un*likely, Victor shifted his ground. "What in heaven's name would they live on?"

"Ernest would have to get regular work. Other people have to."

Victor shook his head pessimistically.

"He's got all sorts of out-of-the-way knowledge, of the kind that's useful to the *littérateur:* he knows French and Italian and he's very well up in French literature. On the other hand he knows no German and is without the solid background of the Public School. Then he's sensitive and charming—a gentleman, in fact. . . ."

"All of which should help him to get work."

"It won't! The sort of people who get the good jobs nowadays are the cads and the pompous. If you're a *maan* from the north with thoroughly brutal manners they think you've got genius. That's the doing of that fellow Henley! The pompous don't need anything but their pomp. No, I am afraid Ernest has a soul. There's *failure* writ large all over him."

"He wouldn't look so bad if he didn't wear those ready-made neckties," observed Nellie practically.

"You mean the black butterfly ones that fasten at the back with a piece of elastic and a boot button?"

Nellie nodded. "And I'm not sure, but I believe he wears reversible cuffs."

"All part of the French pose," replied Victor bitterly. "It's supposed to go with the drinking of *absinthe* and an admiration for Baudelaire and

Verlaine. In my day and generation in France *absinthe* was drunk by those who could afford nothing better: it was the drink of the working man and had about the same degree of romantic association as *gin* with us. As a matter of fact this Polish enthusiasm is part and parcel of the same folly. Verlaine married some little snippet or other and has never left off talking about it. Why they must always be dragging their private affairs into the light of day I can't think. It's very disgusting."

"If it weren't that I don't want to go about too much just now," said Nellie, who was expecting their first child, "I should like to go and have a look at Adelaide for myself."

"She's perfectly accessible, but you wouldn't see anything, I assure you."

"Why?"

"For the simple reason that there's nothing *to* see."

* * * * *

One evening towards the middle of April when Ernest arrived at the restaurant, he perceived at once that the proprietor must be very much worse. Although it was seven o'clock the doctor's brougham was outside, and Missie, who was all by herself in the little ground-floor room that served as an office, was openly in tears.

"They told me to wait in here," she explained.

"Everyone is upstairs. . . . What's going to happen? . . ." Her voice dropped. "I'm frightened."

"You mustn't be frightened, Missie dear. You know what we all believe? . . . what is before him? . . . Eternal bliss . . . life everlasting."

"He is going away from me."

"The time will come when you will join him. Life is very short for all of us."

"But he is not old," said Missie, "and he has had so much trouble."

At that suddenly he could not bear to see her standing there, in the dark little room, in her shabby dress, with her face in her hands to hide the weeping she could not control.

"Missie, I love you," he said.

There was a silence, a silence so profound that he thought he could hear the beating of their two hearts. He was trembling. She had not looked up.

"You're not angry? . . . Look at me, Missie. Let me see your face."

She looked into his eyes.

"I think I should be older," was what she said.

"Yes, my darling, I know . . ."

"I don't quite know what you mean, I think."

"No, of course not. How should you? The nights—the days that I have thought of you—that I have thought of nothing else. . . ."

She stretched out her hand a little way, palm outwards, as though to guard herself against what there was in his voice. He caught it and held it to his body.

"You knew I was feeling like that, didn't you, Missie? I haven't startled you too much, have I? You're not frightened of me? . . ."

"No, it's not that. . . . It's—it's not like anything I know—that's all. . . ."

"Tell me you're not angry!"

"Angry—no, why should I be?"

"And you're not surprised? You knew—something—just a little, of how I felt?"

"I knew you liked me."

She was no longer crying, but there were deep black marks beneath her eyes to show how much she had cried of late, and she was very pale. Her hair was drawn back from her forehead and caught up into an absurd black bow on the top of her head.

"I love you, Adelaide," he said.

* * * * *

Ernest did not sleep a wink that night. He lay tossing from side to side wondering what was going to happen next. He had taken the plunge and now the bridge was clinging, with the most appalling insecurity, it was true, but nevertheless clinging, to the other shore.

But was it? She had not been angry, but on the other hand she had not been very enthusiastic.

The whole thing had fallen rather flat. It had not been, as one had somehow always expected it would, like a scene in a play, with the two actors taking their cues from one another in the neatest manner possible, for in this case one of the actors had been unprepared. Was it that there was an utter and irrevocable difference between men and women in these matters? Or was it that one should rehearse the scene a little bit beforehand in order to avoid this frightful sense of anti-climax?

She had been calm—almost terribly so, while he had been shaken to the nethermost depths of his being. She was so young—barely fifteen. What on earth was he going to say to her mother?

The next morning, as soon as he was up, he wrote to Plarr.

"Foltinowicz is given up by the doctors, and sinks from day to day. You can imagine that in the rather strenuous atmosphere that prevails there I have been carried off my feet. I am afraid you will accuse me of great folly, but yesterday, last night, I declared myself. Do you blame very much? I should like to know. I thought I had resolution to say nothing to her, until she was at least on her way to being seventeen. But we happened to be alone together, and we spoke of grave things and my resolution collapsed. She behaved with very much more discretion than I showed; she seemed to think that I ought to

have waited till she was older, but she admitted that she was not surprised, and was not angry. And then as they say in Parliament 'the matter dropped.' Have I ruined the whole thing, do you think? Advise me, prithee. I assure you I had the most admirable intentions, the most exalted —and the result is that I feel as if I had made a hopeless, not very creditable fool of myself. What will be her attitude do you suppose? The understanding that we should not allude to the thing any more for the present, but go on as before: do you think that is very possible? What ought I to say to her mother? What in the world shall I do? How long is this extraordinary cul-de-sac to last? I wish I could put the position before any woman: the mind of a girl, a girl of that age, is such an inexplicable country to oneself; but a woman might give one clues. Write, prithee, write to me. I am afraid I have been singularly indiscreet, but I assure you I meant it for the best."

"There," said Victor, handing the letter to his wife, "that's what I've been afraid of."

"He seems very agitated, poor boy."

"I don't wonder. However, I dare say it will all blow over. She is only—what is it?—fifteen."

"I don't know. I dare say she's fond of him."

"What—at that age?"

"Yes, why not?"

"For heaven's sake don't tell him so, that's all!"

"Hardly. I'm not supposed to know anything about it."

"The one hope is," said Victor, "that she won't return his affection, now, or at any time. If he marries that girl he's finished."

"I cannot think why. It seems to me that she might be the making of him."

"What is the matter with Ernest as he is? He is a very fine poet. Married, he'll sink into a dreadful Bohemianism. In fact, one can't tell where it mayn't land him."

"It might make him happy," said Nellie.

CHAPTER XI

MEANWHILE, what of Adelaide? Inwardly excited, she remained outwardly calm, for it was quite in order and only to be expected that as one grew up offers of marriage should come pouring in on one. She had begun to get them early, that was all.

In the books that she had read until quite lately the heroine had married the seventh son of a king. The story invariably began, "There was once a king who had seven sons . . ." and it was always the seventh who was successful. He started off by being poor, not at all like a king's son: in the pictures he looked more like a peasant, and up to a point he was often a little ridiculous, but he always came out well in the end.

These, of course, were stories about people who had lived a long time ago and they usually contained an element of the miraculous, but they left a strong impression behind and it was often possible to find a parallel for them in contemporary life. Still, fond as she had been of them, they belonged admittedly to childhood. Nowadays, she read grown-up books, when she

had time to read at all, which was seldom. As a matter of fact, she had just finished a book which had been lent her by one of the women who came in to help. It was one of the threepenny volumes in the Heartsease Library, and was called *Hearts and Coronets*, and in it the heroine, whose name was Pearl, had had any number of offers of marriage before she had finally accepted Sir Reginald Boscabel who had saved her from drowning in the first chapter. All the time, though, there had been a young man called Mark—Mark Henderson—a girlhood's sweetheart, who hung about in the background and was very devoted and who came and stood in the porch at her wedding and felt sad. Well, now *she* had a girlhood's sweetheart, like Pearl, and presently, she supposed, he would give her a diamond ring to wear and she would be *engaged* and Lili Goetz, who had always given herself airs because her father kept a larger restaurant than theirs, would be absolutely green with envy.

On the whole, Mr. Dowson, whom she now thought of as *Ernest*, was more like a king's seventh son than like Mark Henderson in *Hearts and Coronets*. Mark had a red face from being on a farm, and was, the author said, "sturdily" built, reasons indeed why Pearl had not looked on him with favour, whereas the seventh son of a king might well be pale and thin and have untidy hair.

Looking back, she couldn't remember any king's son who had written poetry. They usually made the heroine laugh, or something like that. But it was always a mistake to take things too literally. Besides, it was rather nice to feel that your story was a little different. "There was once a king who had seven sons, and the seventh, who was pale and thin and rather anxious-looking, spent his spare time in writing poetry. . . ." Yes, that was all right. What then . . . ? The heroine was usually a king's daughter—a king's . . .

At that the whole awful present rushed over her like a flood.

* * * * *

The news had been communicated to the dying man upstairs, and in a voice that was no more than whisper he had signified his desire that Herr Dowson should be present when the priest came. . . .

Thus at a moment of intense and lofty feeling Ernest found himself accepted as one of the Foltinowicz family circle, and as the Cross was held to the failing lips of the man on the bed, he knelt with Adelaide's hand in his. Nothing could have been more simple or more beautiful.

On going home that night he wrote the first few lines of a poem:

"Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,
On all the passages of sense,
The atoning oil is spread with sweet
Renewal of lost innocence. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

IT was decided that with the help of the efficient Auguste the restaurant could be kept on. They had their connection, which, now that the mother and daughter were alone in the world, might be expected to enjoy a compassionate enlargement.

Ernest felt that now was the time to approach Madame with a view to regularising his own position. Were he and Adelaide to be looked upon as engaged, or were they not?

"She is very young," said Madame, with her strong foreign accent. "You will perhaps change your mind? That is always possible, *nicht wahr?* "

"*I* shall not change," said Ernest.

Madame smiled. "You love my little daughter, eh? She pleases you? Well, it has always been so, I think. But she is only fifteen and you have no position—no money, eh? You will have to wait."

"I know. I am going to see about getting regular work at once. You know my friend, Victor Plarr? I shall ask him to help me. It shouldn't be at all difficult. He's got a very

good post himself. He is the librarian at our University here, in London. *Bibliothekar*—you follow me?"

"Yes, yes—Herr Plarr—I know . . . with a moustache. All right. You will get a post, not? And then, when she is old enough, you can marry my little girl."

It remained like that. A post and Adelaide. No post, no Adelaide.

"But," said Ernest, struck by a thought, "what does Missie think about it?"

Adelaide, her mother replied, would do as she was told. She had been well brought up and would be content to rely on the judgment of her elders. Besides, it was very certain that Joseph, before he died, had accepted Herr Dowson as a prospective son-in-law. Joseph had always thought very highly of Herr Dowson. He had often said so. "That Herr Dowson," he had said, "is *sympathetische*." What more could you want?

* * * * *

The next thing to do was to set about getting work. Ernest looked every day very carefully through the advertisement columns in the newspapers and whenever there seemed to be a suitable vacancy he wrote and offered himself.

Sometimes it was a mastership in a provincial school and his heart sank. That would mean

going away from Adelaide and giving up all thought of writing. He was relieved when he heard, as he always did, that the post had been filled by someone with previous experience.

Victor was very active on his behalf, keeping his ears open for anything that seemed remotely possible as a permanent means of livelihood. One day, for instance, he heard that a rich invalid gentleman was looking for a cultivated young fellow who would be able to read aloud to him in German and to play the violin.

"Neither of which I can do," observed Ernest.

"No matter. When he sees you he will change his mind. French, Italian and general culture may fill the bill instead, not to speak of personal charm. . . ."

Ernest laughed without heartiness. "I'm afraid I'm an ungrateful brute, but it's a resident post, didn't you say? I don't believe I have the courage to absent myself entirely from Sherwood Street."

"You'd get time off."

"I suppose so."

"And it's very well paid."

"Which means he'll want a devil of a lot for his money. . . . I shan't be able to write a word."

"My dear man, when this old gentleman discovers that he's harbouring a well-known author under his roof you'll get all the time

you can want for writing as well as giving him a new interest in life. . . ."

But this time Victor's optimism was misplaced. A musician was required. They were firm about it.

Then there was the question of a free librarianship, which did really, for once, seem very well worth trying for, since it carried with it a salary of one hundred and sixty pounds a year and unfurnished apartments.

"Could you consider me a competent person to hand out dime novels to transpontine shop boys?" Ernest enquired of his friend Plarr.

"Certainly! But when applying for the post you must disguise the fact that you possess any erudition whatever: and be sure you remember to drop an aitch or two—that's most important!" For Victor did not care for this scheme of Andrew Carnegie's by means of which free reading matter was to be provided for the illiterate masses.

But this fell through as well. There were too many people after it, or something.

Ernest began to get a little disheartened. It was all very boring, and the preoccupation with a matter in which he was not greatly interested had dried up the sources of his inspiration. In fact, since the poem that had come to him at the time of Joseph Foltinowicz's death, which he had called "Extreme Unction," he had not written a word.

CHAPTER XIII

IN the following September the Plarrs' child was born, whereupon Ernest hastened to write off to them:

"Your letter filled me with joy—with its double news. I send my very sincere congratulations, and all good wishes for the continued prosperity of the Bambina and the speedy recovery of the Donna.

"The patronising saint of Sept. 2, according to the Roman calendar, is St. Stephen of Hungary (St. Etienne), of whom I know not much. But in a Milan calendar I find the day set apart to a certain San Mansueto—of whom I know less—that is nothing—but whose name is excellently propitious. My compliments then to Mdlle. Etienne-Mansueta Plarr. I append certain versicles pseudo-eighteenth century, with which she has already inspired me: may she be provocative of many more.

"Mark the day white on which the fates have
smiled:
Eugenio and Egeria have a child.

On whom abundant grace kind Jove imparts
If she but copy either parent's parts.
Then, Muses! long devoted to her race
Grant her Egeria's Virtues and her face;
Nor stay your bounty there—but add to it
Eugenio's learning and Eugenio's wit!"

"Very pretty!" was Victor's mental comment, "but I could wish he had adopted a more Dowsonian metre than the easily written eighteenth-century couplet. It also tickles me that a baby, a descendant of generations of Huguenots, of a worshipper of the Goddess of Reason during the French Revolution and of a sceptical French *savant*, should even tentatively be named after a saint in a Milan calendar, though I shan't, of course, point this out to the dear fellow. . . ."

But Ernest had been thinking of this infant of the Plarrs as the offspring of a marriage that had been made in defiance of convention, as his and Adelaide's would be. Their child, too, would be a girl, for it was said that the child of those who truly loved was always of the weaker sex.

Whenever he met his friend Plarr in these days he would ask such questions as: "Is the Infanta short petticoated yet? Or, when does that interesting event take place?"

"Oh no, not yet," replied the father. "It's winter, you know." Odd, thought Victor, that

a bachelor should think of things like that. Perhaps he even knows about "Burmese trousers," for so had the poetic father named for his own use an intimate garment of infancy. "By the way," he said, "I'm afraid we weren't able to call her by either of the names you suggested. There were godmothers and so on to consider. We've given her family names—Marion—Constance—Helen . . ."

"All pretty ones those," observed Ernest.

"There's another thing," continued Victor, "September the Second, the day of her birth, happens to be the date of Omdurman. It's also the day on which the Fire of London started, and, most curiously, when you consider that she is of Alsatian descent, it is the anniversary of the French national tragedy—the Battle of Sedan. If one believed in such things as omens . . ."

"I do," broke in Ernest eagerly. "I believe very much in such things."

"But, my dear man, dates are quite arbitrary, surely."

"Not in so far as they are governed by the stars."

"Oh, *astrology!*"

"I begin to think, for instance, that in my horoscope the first fortnight in April must be bound up with my fortunes very closely—perhaps fatally. . . ."

Victor smiled.

"It seems to me," pursued Ernest, "that the older people possessed all sorts of knowledge that we've lost sight of. They attributed life to things that we regard as inanimate . . ."

"*Animism*," observed Victor.

"They may even have known the secret of life itself. . . . But, my dear old chap, I may as well admit that I am now in that state of mind when I am prepared to accept anything. You, of course, are a sceptic. . . ."

"I am afraid I am, but I don't say that it isn't amusing to speculate about these things."

* * * * *

The Dowsons had moved again. They had left Lee and had gone across the river into Essex, to Chadwell Heath, a no-man's-land which was approached from Liverpool Street Station by slow and infrequent trains, passing through such places as Bethnal Green, Stepney and Bow Road on the way. But business was getting worse than ever at the Docks, and it had become necessary to move to as inexpensive a locality as possible.

The new house was rather depressing. To begin with, it was dark. There were too many trees about—evergreens. But as it had been going for a mere song, one or two drawbacks were only to be expected.

Sometimes, at night, the atmosphere of the place was more than a little eerie, partly because

the house was so shut in, but also by reason of its closeness to the walls of a very large garden, the owners of which had a whim for being buried in a mausoleum within their own precincts. They were Quakers, which accounted for their not bothering about the consecration of the ground.

When Plarr came down one Saturday afternoon to see the new house he said at once: "It's delightfully gloomy. Talk about Edgar Allan Poe . . . my dear man, and the journey here —bang through the East End. We shall have you blossoming out into *the* poet of the macabre."

Ernest said he could show him better still, and took him for a ramble during which they counted five funerals in Indian file heading towards Walthamstow.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Victor. "I wish we could get a glimpse of that Quaker mausoleum you told me about."

"So do I," agreed Ernest. "It wouldn't be so bad if one could *see* it. It's thinking about these things. . . . I don't mind admitting to you that I lie awake imagining all sorts of ghostlinesses—midnight obsequies by torchlight—corpses risen in their grave-clothes from the tomb—and so on . . ." and he gave a slight shudder.

"Oh, do you? How I wish I could feel intensely about such things as that. To me the horrible is always slightly tinged with the

comic. There's such a very thin line between the two. I remember a story of my youth—'The Horror in the House' it was called—in which everyone died from a smell that came up a pipe from a graveyard. . . ."

"Loathsome! . . ." ejaculated Ernest, shuddering outright.

"On the contrary, my dear man, it was exquisitely funny. Partly, of course, because it was so innocently pre-scientific—you can't die from a smell, I assure you. There's a perfect holocaust, among others an Anglo-Indian Colonel. He languishes in a charming Baroque bed decorated with gilt angels. When I think of the Anglo-Indians I know . . . ha, ha! . . . I really must contrive to find the story again. You'll laugh consumedly."

Ernest gave a pallid smile.

"No, but really," he said, "I'm not sure that this is altogether a fortunate place to have chosen. My mother seems depressed. She complains of the sound made by the dripping of the rain on the leaves. That's not a good sign, do you think?"

"I shouldn't worry. One gets used to these things. You'll find she won't notice it as time goes on. . . . Anyhow you've got splendid rooms. I envy you and your father that delightful study of yours more than I can say."

"Yes, if it were only a little lighter . . . and we're such leagues from everywhere. It's worse

than Lee and that was bad enough in all conscience. On Sundays I am consumed with regret for your ancient hospitable supper-table" (Victor bowed), "and it's quite impossible to get home after any sort of nocturnal festivity. I have either to refuse invitations or to get some kind friend to let me spend the night on a sofa."

Victor looked at his friend in some consternation when he heard this. He did not approve of such haphazard methods of obtaining a night's rest. However, he understood only too well the difficulties with which a dweller in the suburbs, who was also a writer of note, was obliged to contend.

Ernest looked rather ill, he thought. He would have liked to ask him whether there was any special reason why he should be worried or upset just now, but that was just the sort of question you simply could not put to a person, however intimate you were with them, unless they gave you a very clear opening.

Presently, at supper, he made one or two further mental notes. There was, for instance, a something about Mrs. Dowson, difficult to say what, but a something. She was not silent, but it was as though she came from somewhere very far off to take part in the conversation, and she gave the impression, while looking at those to whom she spoke, of not seeing them or of hearing what they said. Then there seemed to be a shortage of servants. Victor gathered that

there was someone in the kitchen, but they waited on themselves. Was it possible that they were as poor as all that? In the intervals of the talk he mused upon the probable amount of the Dowsons' income. It was strange, he thought, that no matter how well you knew a family, the question of its means was never mentioned. Yet how important it was—in some cases vital. He supposed that in the event of any real difficulty the Dowsons had wealthy relations to whom they could apply. Most people had. But there, again, the question of pride would be likely to intervene. He trusted it would never come to that.

Mr. Dowson was saying, "Yes, this question of heredity. . . . It's most curious. What has made you two young fellows take to the writing of poetry? Is it in your blood, or does it spring from some extraneous cause?"

"Of course it's in the blood—in Ernest's, at least," broke in his wife with what might almost have been termed an effect of sharpness, if it had not been for that sense she gave of having taken a journey in order to speak.

"My mother is thinking of my great-uncle Domett," explained Ernest, with a deprecating smile. "He wrote *Ranolf and Amohia*. You may have heard of him."

"You might add that Alfred Domett was the original of Browning's 'Waring,'" said his father.

"Really?" exclaimed Plarr. "Let's see, how does it go?

'What's become of Waring . . .'

I'm afraid I don't know my Browning as I should."

Mr. Dowson quoted:

"'What's become of Waring
Since he gave us all the slip,
Chose land-travel or seafaring,
Boots and chest or staff and scrip,
Rather than pace up and down
Any longer London town? . . .'"

"But this is extraordinarily thrilling," said Plarr. "That really was your uncle, sir?"

"Yes, and he turned up next as Prime Minister of New Zealand."

"With all due deference to Uncle Alfred, I don't think he can be held responsible for me," observed Ernest. "All the poetic uncles in the world wouldn't have made me a poet if it hadn't been for—for—well"—his voice dropped till it was difficult to catch what he said—"for inspiration from another source."

At that Mrs. Dowson startled them all by saying, "But you began to write poetry long before that."

"Oh, verse! . . ."

"I think heredity may be held to account for any small talent possessed by your humble

servant," put in Victor quickly. "My mother is a very skilful versifier, if no more. But it's altogether a most fascinating question. I suppose, sir," he continued, turning to his host, "you know that book of Galton's, *Hereditary Genius?*"

The conversation slid into safer and more general channels.

Almost immediately after supper Victor was obliged to set off on his complicated homeward journey.

"Did you notice?" asked Ernest as they walked along in the darkness on the way to the station. "My mother, I mean. She seems preoccupied, doesn't she? As if she's listening to something that nobody else can hear. It's not like her. She doesn't care about my engagement, of course, but . . ."

"I suppose, like the majority of mothers, she wanted you to make the—er—ordinary sort of marriage."

"Yes."

"Has she met your intended?"

"Not yet . . ." Ernest broke off, to continue after a pause, despondently, "Everyone's against it—everyone . . . except you and yours."

Victor felt a stab of compunction when he heard this, which was, in his own case, so far from the truth.

"How are things going, if one may ask?"

"Well enough," said Ernest, "if only I had

the great gift of patience. I haven't and so I die many deaths daily." He sighed. "I do try to possess my soul in patience, but the result is not so much resignation as 'a sort of sloth and tristitia which'—how does it go?—'which even monkish moralists have held to be in the nature of a sin.' " He was silent for a moment after this, continuing, "It's a vile and stupid world, my dear fellow, and it will be good to have done with it."

With such words as these echoing in his mind it was small wonder that Victor should feel uneasy as his train moved off to give him a final glimpse of his friend standing forlornly beneath a station lamp.

CHAPTER XIV

ADELAIDE found that being engaged did not make so much difference to one as she had been led to expect. Ernest still dropped in every evening, more or less, but then he always had. It really wasn't any different. He sat at the same table and she brought him his dinner and then they played bezique, or a very good double patience called *chicane*, or else halma. After that he would go off to see some of his important friends and talk about *Art*.

If there was any change at all it was that he seemed very much less jealous than he had been. In fact, oddly enough, he was sometimes quite annoyed with her because she did not praise some man or other who happened to come in.

"Women are all alike," he said. "They cannot perceive what is really admirable in my sex."

"What do you mean?" enquired Adelaide rather crossly, for she did not like being alluded to as one of the herd.

"They admire the great beefy, bull-necked, obvious type, that shoulders its way to success and beats its wife as like as not. Now I've just

pointed out to you a man in a thousand. He's sweet-natured, talented, unassuming, everything that's charming, in fact, and you won't even look at him."

"Why should I? What is he to me?" enquired Adelaide, jumping ten of Ernest's halma-men as she spoke.

"Why must he be anything? It's just the same where Auguste is concerned. Really, sometimes, Missie, you treat that poor fellow like a dog."

"I've known him a very long time. . . ."

"Is that any reason why you should be blind to his very excellent qualities?"

"I see that he is a good waiter . . ." said Adelaide, intent on the game.

"Don't you see how attractive he is? . . . There's a simplicity about him that I confess *I* envy."

"I don't know what you mean. Auguste is Auguste. I don't think about him. He is here and I am here. He doesn't get in the way and we have jokes together sometimes. . . ."

"Ah, well, there, you see . . . ! He has a sense of humour."

"Yes, of course. He laughs a lot. I like people who laugh, don't you?"

"I'm not sure that I do," said Ernest. "It may mean that they only see the outsides of things. . . ."

"I think that too," agreed Adelaide equably.

So they laughed together, did they? She liked people with a sense of humour, did she? Well, humour was not *his* strong point, that was certain. He was far too keenly aware of the misery there was in the world, and the cruelty and the misunderstanding, to be for ever laughing and joking over every trivial event as it came along. But Auguste was good-looking —very. He had those fair, blunt features that one saw so often in the north of Italy, and the same fair hair. He was extraordinarily good-tempered too. It was impossible to imagine him out of temper. People who were like that had a strength of their own. Then he was physically strong. Winter or summer he never seemed to suffer from even the most trifling ailment. He had splendid teeth and a hearty appetite, and didn't seem to know the meaning of the word *depression*. . . .

But what need was there to worry about Auguste? Adelaide had always treated him with the most complete indifference, not to say contumely. And as for the man himself, he no doubt thought of Adelaide as a child, and the chances were that he had a young woman of his own.

Nevertheless the thought of Auguste rankled. The point was, he was there, in the restaurant. They were together, he and Adelaide. Without those who were most nearly concerned being the least aware of them, things grew. . . .

Such thoughts as these contained the seeds of suffering. It was hard work to keep them under. If only he could get a post he would defy every living soul and *marry* Adelaide, fifteen or no. But there were no posts for such as him . . . and no future . . . and no happiness. . . .

* * * * *

It was queer, how by simply looking into his face Adelaide knew when he had been drinking.

"You will kill yourself," she said.

"Oh no, my dear, I am not one of those the gods love. . . ."

"Do they kill those who drink?"

"No, they kill those they love."

"That's silly," said Adelaide. "You must not believe such things."

"I don't. I am too miserable to believe anything."

"And why is that? Because you drink too much, isn't it? Absinthe! . . . You are happy while you are drinking it, but afterwards . . ."

"I am bad, Missie, bad through and through . . . and weak. I shall never be any good to you."

"You should confess," said Adelaide, crossing herself.

"If I could believe it was as easy as that," muttered Ernest.

"Oh, but it is! When I have done something wicked—told a lie perhaps or . . . well, what one does . . . I go to Confession and . . ."

"Yes, but you—*you*, Missie. What do you know of sin?"

One grows a little tired of hearing about these mysterious sins of his, thought Missie.

CHAPTER XV

THE house at Chadwell Heath proved more expensive to keep up than the Dowsons had expected. It leaked, and things kept on happening to the drains or the roof, so that it became obvious that it was absurd to stay on there.

This time, since Ernest had so many friends and interests in London, they thought that it would be as well to come back into town. They would have liked to live in Chelsea, but in the present state of their finances that was impossible. Across the river, though, only a few minutes away, there had just been erected some of those new flats that were springing up all over the place. They were small, and it would mean getting rid of a great deal of furniture, but on the other hand they were close to the bridge that had been made famous by Whistler, and the front windows looked out over the pleasant distances of Battersea Park. The day they moved in they all agreed that it was as if they were making a new start in life.

Almost at once, however, Mr. Dowson began not to be able to sleep. He had always been a

somewhat delicate man, with whom sleeping was a ticklish affair, but now he began to be aware of a dull interior pain that kept him awake for hours on end.

While lying awake he worried. He worried about the future of the dock and about its being mortgaged to the foreman and about what would happen to his wife and family if things got any worse. And all the time it was plainly to be seen that things *would* get worse. It could hardly be otherwise.

What with the pain and the anxiety there were times when he was nearly frantic, but he did not say anything about it to the others because he felt that his wife had worries enough already, and she, like himself, was given to worrying more than was perhaps always quite necessary. He did not *say* he could not sleep, nor did he mention that dull and constant ache of his. He did what seemed to him to be much more sensible: he took things to deaden the pain and at the same time to induce sleep. Really, it was extraordinarily simple. You had only to go into a chemist's and explain matters and they gave you something without demur. Of course they were all preparations of opium and you had to be careful how much you took and some didn't work at all. Incidentally, it was curious to see how they differed in their action. You simply had to go on trying until you found one that suited your particular idiosyncrasies.

Meanwhile, because he feared that his wife would find out about the things he took to make him sleep, he made the excuse that *she* would sleep better if they slept in separate rooms. There was the little one that had been set aside for Rowland when he came home for the holidays. After that everything was easier and probably a great deal better for her too, poor soul, was her husband's thought.

But Mrs. Dowson did not find it any better. She found it, on the contrary, very much worse. For she, too, had her worries. She had begun to wonder if she had been what was commonly called a *good* mother. That she had not been a disciplinarian she was aware. She knew that she had not taught Ernest, when he was little, to fold his clothes up tidily before going to bed, or to put his toys back in the cupboard when he had finished playing with them, or to wash very thoroughly behind his ears. She had loved her sons most tenderly, but she feared she had not been very energetic when it came to the details of their bringing up. Ernest did not nowadays, for instance, care where he slept, whether upon a friend's sofa or simply curled up in somebody's armchair; for the matter of that, it did not seem to strike him as peculiar not to go to bed at all. He did not bother about his clothes or mind what he ate. He noticed even less than the rest of his sex whether things were strictly clean or not. And then, as if all

this were not sufficiently odd, he had gone and got himself entangled with some little creature in a restaurant—oh, dear!—and one had so hoped he would marry some nice girl of—well—one's own kind. But the trouble with Ernest had always been that if he loved a person he could not be brought to trouble about their station in life. He was typical of the child who had never known the hand or face of anger, who had known nothing but love at home and who expected to meet it wherever he went. The most unlikely people would come to one and talk of his sweetness, his gentleness and of how affectionate he was. But were these characteristics that would fit him to cope with the buffets of life? She feared not.

She was afraid there was no denying that he sometimes drank too much wine. Sometimes he came home rather late and sometimes he did not come at all. Of course, till recently, it had been such a very long journey from town, but when he had failed to come she had not been able to help worrying and there had been many nights when she had lain awake and listened for the sound of his key in the latch. He seemed to be—well—just a little *erratic*. But things were worrying for him too, poor boy! There was no longer enough to do at the dock for both him and his father and there was the future to think of. . . . Journalism seemed to be a trifle—well—precarious. He was always trying to get some

sort of regular work and the failure to do so made him depressed and moody.

But everything was worrying for all of them just now, with the shortness of money. This was particularly tiresome for the one who had to do the housekeeping, and Alfred was getting to be so difficult about his food. . . . Then there was Rowland's schooling to consider, and one didn't always feel too well oneself. . . .

Mr. Dowson had decided that chloral seemed to suit his system better than any of the other drugs he had tried. He took the prescribed dose and the result was a long dreamless sleep and a not too unpleasant awakening. A little dryness of the mouth, that was all. Not much in the way of payment for such a boon as a good night's rest! And another advantage that chloral had over any of the other drugs with which he had experimented was that you could quite safely increase the dose when necessary, because, of course, with all these things you had to take a little more of them as time went on.

But the pain grew worse. Sometimes it was almost unbearable. It was a terribly hot summer and sometimes it was as much as he could do to drag himself down to Limehouse in the morning and home again at night. At last he was obliged to go to a doctor and what he then heard was harder to bear than any pain. . . .

Thus it was that there came a morning when he was late for breakfast. Ernest went into

Rowland's little room to find him still asleep, and do what he would he could not wake him. Mr. Dowson had taken the little more that was not safe.

* * * * *

It was a shocked and sorrowful Ernest who found himself suddenly at the head of a family. But actually there was not very much time for him to think his own thoughts: there was so much to do. He found himself closeted with lawyers, who spoke of sales and mortgages and the duties of an executor, till his brain reeled. Either, he thought, his father's affairs must be singularly complicated or he himself was destitute of a business sense. The one clear fact that emerged from the welter was that the dock must be sold. As soon as that was done, said the lawyers, they would be able to see daylight.

But nobody seemed to want to buy the dock, which was scarcely surprising; and in the meantime business was carried on there very much as before. The only difference was that now the Dowsons had nothing to do with it. However, Ernest was very good friends with the foreman-mortgagor, and occasionally spent a night under his roof.

The flat was given up and Mrs. Dowson went back to Lee, where she had once known happiness.

She was only forty-six years old, but it seemed to her that her life was at an end. After her husband's death she had been ill for a time and while her illness lasted a fearful idea had come into her head. She had begun to think that at some time in her life she must have done something very wicked for everything to be going so wrong with them all. Even now, although she was better, the thought would come back to her and she would lie awake at night trying to think what it could have been that she had done: but there was nothing specific that she could remember. Of course, she had had bad thoughts. She had not hitherto supposed that hers had been worse than other people were likely to have had, but now she wondered if perhaps she had not been mistaken.

Then she was tortured by the knowledge that her husband had been ill and in pain unrealised by anyone, and it seemed to her that the dreadfulness of this, which was as bad as anything she had imagined that woman could be called upon to bear, was part of her punishment.

That brought her back again to the thing for which she was being punished. Perhaps the really wicked things you did you could not afterwards remember. Perhaps her wickedness had been so frightful that a merciful Providence had wiped it from her mind. That was an awful thought, but no more awful than the sin itself must be. She might have committed the Sin

against the Holy Ghost and now have no recollection of it. She did not even know what the Sin was, except that it was of a most terrible nature. The only thing of which she was sure was that she was being punished for something, and all her family with her. Every day, and especially every night, she grew more certain that this was so.

What did you do when you had committed some terrible sin? There must be some way in which a repentant sinner could obtain expiation. She loved her family and they were suffering for her. The thought was torment.

With the desire for expiation came the thought of death. Prayer she had tried. All her life she had prayed, but that, evidently, was not enough. No, the death of the sinner was what was wanted. How she would die she did not yet know. All she knew was that sincere repentance followed by death meant that all her sins would be washed clean. She would die and then they would know that she was a repentant woman. The thought brought immense comfort.

* * * * *

This time there was an inquest, because it could not by any manner of means be supposed that this had been a natural death. It could

hardly have been accidental either, since the poor lady had been found hanging from the end of her bed.

The Coroner, who was a compassionate man, pronounced the words "temporary mental derangement," so that she might at least receive the advantages of Christian burial. Nevertheless it was to be many a day before he could forget the look in the eyes of the poor lady's eldest son, who had been the principal witness at the inquest.

Ernest was, in fact, *all eyes*, as the saying is, for he was unable either to eat or sleep. Had it not been for Adelaide, indeed, he believed that he too might have died. But she would say, "You *must* eat. See, I will bring you something very nice!"

The good Auguste was behind her in these efforts, for it was he who delved in cookery books in order to produce exotic messes that were calculated to rouse the gastronomic desires of the most moribund.

It was impossible to resist these two, they were so patient and so kind. There was about them a charming seriousness, as of children playing at the preparation of meals. It was beyond measure sweet to Ernest to be cared for in this way. He was intensely touched, not so much by the fact that Adelaide should appoint herself guardian of his well-being as that Auguste should thus exert himself.

Nowadays, when life, from being a dream, had become a nightmare, the little restaurant in Sherwood Street stood out as the one link with a reality that had always threatened to dissolve at the least touch.

CHAPTER XVI

AS time went on Ernest resumed his habit of going to see the Plarrs, whose child was now nearly two years old.

"Come in, my dear fellow," Victor would say in a voice that always held the warmest note of welcome. "Both the maids are at a Bible-meeting. My dear mother belongs to that school of thought that believes in letting them do as they like. It's rather trying at times."

"I infinitely prefer having the door opened to me by the master of the house," observed Ernest. "A maid's demeanour can be exceedingly chilling."

"I'm terrified of butlers. Not that I often encounter them. . . . Come this way. Marion and I are in the bookroom. I'm in charge while Nellie entertains a local lady. I'm afraid we're rather tousled, but I know you won't mind that."

The peacocks' feathers now turned their serene and formal faces to a garden full of sunlight. A little garden, that sloped downwards to a railway cutting.

"*Mahlion dot a doat,*" said the daughter of the house, by way of greeting.

Her father interpreted: "She means she's got a goat. You must see it! . . . I was walking along the Trafalgar Road, our local slum, when a man came up to me with a pretty little brown kid on a string, saying that I could have it for five shillings. It sounded cheap, and as I have always been told that a goat's appetite for grass will act as a natural lawn-mower it seemed to me heaven-sent. This one, as a matter of fact, could be relied upon to mow a fair-sized *park*."

"A goat sounds delightfully arcadian," observed Ernest.

"Doesn't it? That's what I thought. Unfortunately, Nellie maintains that it has an unpleasant smell, so I'm afraid we shall have to get rid of it."

There was a pause during which Marion remarked informatively, "*Tat tilled dove . . .*"

"Oh yes," said her father, "we've had bad luck with our pets of late. You remember the doves that used to hang outside the dining-room window in a wicker cage? . . . Some horrible cat killed one of them. Poor Marion was much distressed."

"It was not the work of Loveday or Doushka, I hope," said Ernest, naming the Plarrs' two semi-Persians.

"Oh no—at least, we *believe* it was a large fierce marauding brute of a tabby that we've

noticed about. It belongs to some pompous people who've got a big house up the road, but we don't like to make a fuss because Marion plays with their son—aged three."

"She's very good," said Ernest, "unusually quiet and attentive for her age, I should think."

"Yes, she's no trouble, except when she's bored. Children, poor dears, have to endure a deal of boredom, like animals. . . . But I expect she's drinking in all we're saying for future reference."

"Has she shown any literary tendencies yet?" asked Ernest, gently playful.

"Not exactly. But we did notice the other day, when her mother was saying 'One, two, buckle my shoe,' that she made sounds in time to it, which, by the way, is scientifically interesting, because that's what savages do. But I am not at all sure that I want her to grow up into one of your literary ladies. I detest blue-stockings. Supposing she were to turn out like George Eliot, or even Madame de Genlis . . . " and her father looked at her apprehensively.

"But you wouldn't mind her being a poet, would you?"

"Elizabeth Barrett Browning — Christina Rossetti—hum! . . . Sappho, if she existed, was a very queer fish. . . . One woman in ten million is a poet. The feminine nature, being practical and objective, is opposed to poetry, don't you think? . . ."

"Munkaton, munkaton, munkaton, munk," remarked Marion suddenly.

"What's that? . . . Wait a minute . . . let me write that down," cried her father in high excitement. "That's the first really rhythmic expression I've heard from her. That must be your presence, my dear man. What was it now? . . . 'Munkaton . . . munkaton . . . munkaton . . . munk.' D'you think she's thinking of 'monkey' or 'monk'? It's like another word of hers—'bulf'—which might mean either bull or wolf, and 'turboten,' which is either turbot or turban."

"It's most likely to be 'monkey,' I should think. Monks can hardly be within her purview yet."

"Oh, I don't know. There's our friend Olivier Destrée. He was here not so long since. Father Bruno, he calls himself. But of course you know. Such a charming fellow . . . " " . . . to have given way to that folly . . ." Victor was going to add, but remembering, checked himself in time.

Presently, each holding Marion by a hand, they went to look at the goat which they found in the act of conscientiously finishing off some China asters.

"Do you notice the alleged odour?" asked Victor anxiously.

Ernest sniffed about in the air near the animal. "Well, since you've drawn my attention

to it . . . I might not have otherwise. . . . Ought he to be eating those flowers, do you think?"

"I suppose not, but what is one to do? One can't punish a goat. Besides, I hate people who punish an animal for obeying its instincts. . . ."

"*Bad doat!*" said Marion, who had recognised the word "punish."

"He's like a swarm of locusts, isn't he?" observed her father. "By and by everything will be bare. However, that won't matter much as we shall probably be moving . . ."

"Moving? . . . where?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you we were considering it? To Kensington."

"*Kensington!*" echoed Ernest, in the tone of one who has been physically struck.

"Nothing's settled yet. But I've found a most jolly house . . . and there's really no reason why we should stay on in Blackheath. We only came here in the first place because my mother wanted to be near her people, but now her sister's dead and her nephews and nieces have scattered to the four corners of the globe. . . ."

"Is there any inescapable reason why you should go to Kensington?"

"Only that we've friends there. I know you don't like it, my dear fellow, but there's the Park for Marion and it'll be much more convenient for my work."

"Yes, of course."

Kensington! The home of the "young lady" of that ilk, of gentlemen with top-hats, of the Academician, the successful literary man, the barrister with briefs, the retired Anglo-Indian. . . . This would mean the end of the Plarrs and all they had stood for. Henceforth they would belong to the army of the *select*. It was symbolic, indeed, that the dove had been killed and that the goat smelt.

"I hope you'll come and see us as heretofore," said Victor, who was only too well aware of the chill that had fallen between them at mention of the word *Kensington*.

"But why not? That's to say if you're able to receive such a ragamuffin as me in the *Royal* Borough."

"Oh, bosh!" exclaimed Victor. "You know we shall never be like that. Does it matter where one lives as long as one's heart's in the right place?"

"No, perhaps not. But places can be curiously depressing, don't you think? I can't bear either slums or anything that's too obviously prosperous. After all, they're both symptoms of the same thing. Belgravia seems to me just as appalling in its way as Bermondsey."

"I see your point," conceded Victor, with polite inattention. Such remarks as these of Ernest about slums and symptoms smacked sadly of Fabianism.

"I'm afraid I shall never be a respectable member of society," added Ernest.

* * * * *

"How do you think he is?" asked Victor of his wife when their guest had gone.

"Rather miserable, poor fellow."

"I thought he seemed quiet. Of course I was careful to avoid painful topics, but I should have liked to know how he is feeling and how he and Rowland have been left. I suppose we shall never know. If only one could ask these things outright. . . . I must say I have always found it so refreshing with the few Americans one meets, the way in which they take you into their confidence as to the amount of their incomes and what their occupations are, and so on. Of course it's utterly ill-bred, but how one likes them for it."

"I don't think we need worry ourselves too much about Ernest," observed Nellie. "You must remember he has Missie."

But at the mention of Adelaide Victor made a sound indicative of pessimism.

CHAPTER XVII

ERNEST had been going through his poems and had found that they numbered over fifty, also that they were nearly all either about Adelaide or had been indirectly inspired by her. Fifty seemed a good many—enough, he thought, to make what the critics were fond of calling a "slim" volume. Well, why not?

The more he thought about it the more did the idea appeal to him. They should be dedicated to Adelaide, so that they would form an immortal proof of his love. Incidentally they might bring him fame.

The question was whether or not to tell Adelaide. She was rather young. He was not at all sure that he wanted her to read *Cynara*, say, before they were married. She was still so exquisitely pure of mind that he would never forgive himself if, through him, she were to suffer any kind of soilure. On the other hand, was it fair, when you were laying the best and finest that was in you at another's feet, that she should remain anonymous? He did not think so.

"That you should do this for me!" exclaimed Adelaide when he had revealed his plan.

"But of course, Missie, for you! How should it be otherwise? You *are* my poems."

She wanted to know all about it: when they would be out: how much money he expected to make.

"No money," he said. "At least, not enough to be worth mentioning. You see, Missie, so few people read poetry. Perhaps only about three hundred and fifty five-shilling copies would be published at first. That's what usually happens. Just a few very special people would buy them and then, who knows? . . . there might be a bigger edition."

Missie made a rapid mental calculation in terms of dinners, the form of commerce of which she knew most. The profit on a dinner at five shillings was about one-and-three. What was three hundred and fifty one-and-threepences? One hundred shillings was five pounds—a hundred threepences was twenty-five shillings. . . .

"Fifteen pounds—about," she said with commendable speed.

"What's fifteen pounds, my darling girl?" asked Ernest, who was thinking of something else.

"What you'd make if you got one-and-threepence a copy."

"Oh! . . ."

"It's quite a lot."

"Don't let's talk about money in connection with my book."

"But we can't get married without it. Don't you want to get married?"

"Oh, Missie! . . ."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He was not very reasonable, but then poets weren't. Again and again her mother had said to her: "He is a dreamer, that young man. It is you who will have to be the practical one." But Adelaide did not see how her practicality would help matters if there was nothing to be practical about.

It was all very well! Lili Goetz had become engaged to a Yiddisher young gentleman, called Samuel Menelstein, who took her to theatres and out for the day to places like Hampstead Heath, while she, Adelaide, never *saw* her fiancé except in the restaurant.

"That is as it should be," said her mother complacently. "Lili is not at all well brought up."

"She has lots of fun."

"*Fun* do you call it, to go to such a place as Hampstead Heath? I am ashamed of you, Adelaide."

"I should like to go there. I should like to go out sometimes. Ernest and I are never alone together."

"You are not yet old enough. Presently you will be together as much as you wish."

So it went on. It was always "by and by," "presently," "later." She felt sometimes that she would be an old woman before she got married.

* * * * *

Ernest felt it too, and more than she did, by a very great deal, but that was not a thing you could talk about to a young unmarried girl. Her mother understood and was sympathetic. Madame Foltinowicz was unfailingly kind to him. In the meantime, though, like the good mother she was, she saw to it that he and Adelaide should not be too much alone together. If only he could get a settled position! If only he could pull himself up! He seemed to be sinking down again into that fathomless black pit out of which his love had lifted him. Only one thing had power to lighten his mood, and that was the thought of his book. When that appeared Adelaide would realise the strength of his love for her.

Meanwhile, prudence forbade that he should stay any longer where she was. He would go again to France. That would give him breathing space. There, amongst French artists and men-of-letters, with their broader outlook on life, he might be able to overcome the momentary intensity of his desire.

* * * * *

As luck would have it, just across the Channel,

in Dieppe, there was at this moment quite a colony of his friends. The smart little French watering-place, famous for its casino, its races, and as a resort of the *beau* and *demi-mondes*, had also become a kind of sub-headquarters of the movement. Here might be found Arthur Symons, who was very much taken up with his idea of a new monthly magazine that should begin, so to speak, where *The Yellow Book* left off; here also was Charles Condor, the modern Watteau, painter of fans; Smithers, most advanced of publishers; and Beardsley, who was writing a fairy story for sophisticated minds which was to appear in the new periodical as a serial.

From this it will be inferred, and rightly, that a schism had occurred within the movement. Oscar Wilde, in his search for ever more brightly hued sins, had discovered one that was altogether too bizarre. Rumours were abroad, nobody knew what was going to happen next, and the whole ephemeral structure of the movement was wobbling.

Meanwhile, Beardsley had come across some delicious old manuscript paper in a nearby castle, and although it was getting more and more difficult to devise any very new or startling way of doing things had managed to hit on the happy scheme of writing his story in one of the public rooms at the casino. Here, therefore, he might be seen at almost any time with his unusual paper and a quill pen working away at

Under the Hill, which, in spite of its title, was about nothing so out-of-doors as a hill, but that dealt with an underworld of its author's own imagining.

While Beardsley was thus engaged, Condor, the big Australian, carrying everywhere with him a whiff of the Bush, would be outside on the beach in close attendance upon that famous beauty of the opera, Cléo de Mérode, who, in the most charming little black socks and with a pair of yellow gloves, was gambolling at the margin of the waves. Near at hand, under a striped awning, sat Arthur Symons, pencil in hand, writing a daring study of Dieppe for the first number of his magazine, while beside him lounged Ernest Dowson.

Symons had broken off to say: "What do you think of this? 'There is a fantastical quality in Dieppe air which somehow turns us all, at our moments, into amiable and enthusiastic lunatics. . . .' True, eh? Relays of friends keep arriving, I, as little as they, know why. I myself, for example, came here for a Saturday to Monday, and I find that I have stayed two months."

Dowson nodded, a little absently. He was thinking that he for his part might be feeling rather more amiable and enthusiastic if he felt a trifle less unwell. He had only arrived last night and had not yet recovered from the voyage. If it was not that then the sea air did not agree

with him. Everything looked to him pale green and he felt horrible.

"Moody fellow, Dowson," thought Symons, returning to his article. For the next twenty minutes his pencil travelled rapidly to and fro, only being lifted from time to time as he paused to observe his subject.

"Rare indeed," he wrote, "is the woman who can look pretty, in her toilette or herself, as she comes out of the sea, wraps herself in a sort of white nightgown, and staggers up the beach, the water running down her legs. Even at the more elegant moment when she drops her *peignoir* at the sea's edge, before stepping in, it is hard for her, with the best intentions on her part and the best of wishes on ours, to look desirable. She is often wise enough to wear corsets; without them, even an excellent figure may appear a little extreme, in one direction or another. It is with a finer taste, after all, that in England the women are not allowed to bathe with the men, are kept out of sight as much as possible. A sentimental sensualist should avoid the French seaside. He will be pained at seeing how ridiculous a beautiful woman may look when she has very few clothes on. The lines of the body are lost or deformed; there is none of the suggestion of ordinary costume, only a grotesque and shapeless image, all in pits and protuberances, for which nature should be ashamed to accept responsibility. Complete

nudity, there is no doubt, has its charm, though of a somewhat primitive kind; but this state of being undressed and yet covered, in this make-shift, unmilliner-like way, it is too barbarous, Mesdames, for the tolerance of any gentleman of taste."

Instinctively aware that his companion had come to the end of a period and could therefore be spoken to without inconsiderateness, Ernest murmured: "I think I'll see if I can discover Aubrey anywhere about."

"You'll find him in the casino, my dear Ernest. Have you not heard? He is writing a fairy-tale for me and has conceived the notion that it will contain an altogether new and peculiar flavour if it is written in the midst of the *va et vien* of the multitude."

Yes, Ernest had heard. It was next door to impossible not to hear of anything that Beardsley conceived to be new and peculiar. Privately he thought it an excessively silly plan, but he realised that he was in no fit state just now to express himself with regard to the niceties of æstheticism. The after-effects of sea-sickness seemed to be strangely conducive to philistinism.

After the noise and glare of the sea-front the interior of the casino was quiet and dim, but there, sure enough, sat Beardsley, a skeleton figure, bending over his manuscript in a corner of the deserted *salle des jeux*.

As Dowson's shadow fell across the floor in

front of him he looked up, smiled, and said: "Ah, it's you. Don't you find Dieppe a sweet place? I meant to go back a Sunday or two ago, but missed the boat."

He looked hideously ill: as though death had already spun a web about him. It was impossible not to applaud the courage that kept him at work and posing to the end.

Ernest foraged about in his mind for a suitably precious remark to make, but all he could think of was: "I shan't stay. I only came to see what you were doing."

"This is what I am doing," replied Beardsley, and handed him a page of his antique-looking manuscript, which was covered with a fine, clear, almost clerk-like hand. Thereafter, for a space of five minutes or so there was silence, while Ernest read:

"As for the rest of the company, it boasted some very noticeable dresses, and whole tables of quite delightful coiffures. There were spotted veils that seemed to stain the skin; fans with eye-slits in them, through which the wearers peeped and peered; fans painted with figures and covered with the sonnets of Sporion and the short stories of Scaramouch; and fans of big, living moths stuck upon mounts of silver sticks. There were masks of green velvet that made the face look trebly powdered; masks of the heads of birds, of apes, of serpents, of dolphins, of men and women, of little embryons

and of cats; masks like the faces of gods; masks of coloured glass, and masks of thin talc and of india-rubber. There were wigs of black and scarlet wools, of peacocks' feathers, of gold and silver threads, of swansdown, of the tendrils of the vine, and of human hair; huge collars of stiff muslin rising high above the head; whole dresses of ostrich feathers curling inwards; tunics of panthers' skins that looked beautiful over pink tights; capotes of crimson satin trimmed with the wings of owls; sleeves cut into the shapes of apocryphal animals; drawers flounced down to the ankles, and flecked with tiny red roses; stockings clocked with fêtes galantes, and curious designs; and petticoats cut like artificial flowers. . . ."

Ernest handed back the page without speaking. He very much disliked what he had just read, yet here, again, how far his judgment was influenced by a wave of nausea that engulfed him at that moment was difficult to say. At the same time the realisation of his companion's desperate condition of health urged him to express encouragement.

"The bourgeois will squirm."

"That is one's hope," observed Beardsley, with an air of modesty.

"Well, I shan't detain you longer," said Ernest. "I thought to imbibe a cognac. . . . Can you recommend me a café? All this" —he waved a hand to indicate the terrasse

of the casino — "strikes me as so very *mondaine*."

"Yes, if you go out there you will observe two persons with the appearance of celebrities. They are Massenet and Saint Saëns. Jane Hading also honours us with her presence at the moment. As for painters . . . But you will find them in the hinder parts of the town where they are all engaged on studies of the nude—for you must know that it is now the fashion in France to paint completely naked women in the most unlikely situations—out-of-doors, for instance," and he shivered.

"Yes, I must say it isn't very warm here. I've been cold ever since I arrived."

"I strongly advise you not to be so rash as to attempt to bathe," said Beardsley earnestly. "But you asked me to recommend you to a café. There are the Rouen and the Tribunaux, both in the Grande Rue, or . . ."

"Thanks, I'll try one of those. Au revoir."

But Ernest did not for one moment mean to try one of those cafés in the Grande Rue. Everyone else would be there intent on being precious or brilliant and posing away for all they were worth. What he wanted was to be with people who didn't know that it was possible to be precious or brilliant, who didn't even know the meaning of the words, and who had never dreamed even in nightmares of a world that approximated to Aubrey Beardsley's imaginings.

He had a sudden longing for Adelaide, more violent than any he had yet known. He saw that no matter what he did or where he went that was a pain that would not be stilled: in fact, by coming so far away from her he had only augmented it. The others might come to Dieppe for a Saturday to Monday and remain for two months, but not he.

The sun glinted grimly on the greenish stretch of water that divided him from England as he turned his footsteps in the direction of the harbour. It was there, in some fishermen's estaminet, that he hoped to find oblivion.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was late in eighteen-ninety-five and Adelaide, who was rapidly becoming quite a good business woman, had now for some time been in the habit of keeping a kind of mental profit and loss account where Ernest was concerned. On the credit side was, first and foremost, his love for her, then came his understanding, his beautiful manners and his cleverness. On the debit side there was the fact that he drank more than he should, from which depended a lot of subsidiary faults, such as looking awful and being depressed and never having any money. Then there were those sins on which he laid such stress, the mysteriousness of which, however, were, as far as she was concerned, a polite fiction. For Adelaide was now seventeen, and, really, that was an age at which it was possible, supposing you had eyes and ears, to know practically all there was to know, only of course it didn't do to admit as much.

On balance, then, Ernest came out slightly on the debit side, but who wouldn't? . . . and she was really very fond of him. She did not know whether she *loved* him or not, but that was a

thing it was difficult to be quite sure about. She had certainly been led to believe that being in love was rather an exciting feeling, whereas the feeling she had for him was not a bit more exciting than she had for a great many other people, including Auguste.

Her mother said it did not matter whether she was in love or not so long as he was. Love was a thing, said Madame Foltinowicz, that came *after* marriage. So long as the man you married wasn't actually distasteful to you it was quite certain that you would end by loving him. Ernest wasn't distasteful to her, on the contrary: it was only that he had one or two rather outstanding faults.

One of the things she did not altogether like about him, though her feeling in the matter was hardly strong enough to make her enter it to the debit of his account, was that he would insist on treating her as though she were still very young. That was a thing Auguste didn't do, but then Auguste was nothing if not sensible. He took one into his confidence quite a lot and asked one's advice, and sometimes even acted on it. Then, again, Ernest was fond of saying that she was like a *Madonna*, which was flattering, but took a good deal of living up to. It was because of this that her mother had thought it advisable that she should do her hair in a demure sort of way, so she wore it parted in the middle and with only a very slight

Alexandra fringe. Her mother seemed to think very highly of Ernest. She said he was an English gentleman.

Lili Goetz, of whom she was seeing a fair amount, now that both she and Lili were engaged, said she thought it was a rule that your mother either liked your fiancé very much indeed or not at all. She had noticed that this was so. She said that Adelaide might count herself lucky that her mother could be included under the first heading because it could be very uncomfortable for all concerned if it were otherwise. Lili knew a tremendous lot, partly because she was like that, but also because Sam Menelstein told her all his thoughts as he had them. Adelaide wished that Ernest did this to her. She would have liked to know what Ernest thought —*really* thought, that was. He told her a great many of his thoughts, but they were all rather poetical.

Then there was this business of his going away so much. She didn't want to be selfish and of course he needed a holiday, but so did a lot of other people. Auguste never got a holiday from one year's end to another, but that didn't seem to matter a bit. Then, again, Lili was very strong on the point that a fiancé ought to want to be with the girl he was engaged to. In fact, Lili had advised her that the next time he mentioned going away she should say something about it, and she rather thought she

would, because it was humiliating when people asked her where Ernest was to have to tell them he was in France, and then, when they said how long for, not to be able to give a definite answer.

Meanwhile, Ernest had come to the conclusion that he could not stand very much more of the present state of affairs. He was always on the look-out for posts and answering advertisements, but the whole thing had become a farce. He didn't *want* a post—he wanted Adelaide.

The only thing to do to still the longing in his heart was to get as far away from her as possible. Existence was much more bearable in France.

When he went to say good-bye to Adelaide he thought she looked rather pale.

"You don't mind my going, do you, my darling?" he asked. "Because if you do . . ."

She said, only it didn't seem to be Adelaide who spoke, "No, I don't mind."

"I believe you do. Missie, tell me, would you rather I didn't?"

"No, of course not!"

"What is it, then? O God! how can I go on waiting for you?"

In a cold, conventional little voice she said, "I hope you will have a very nice holiday."

"I wish I weren't going! . . . Missie, will you marry me—now, at once?"

"What should we live on?"

"Oh, we should manage somehow. We both know what it is to do without things."

"I don't want to go on doing without things for the rest of my life. I want some fun."

"We all do, Missie. But there is no fun without the person you love."

"You seem to have it—going off to France. . . ."

"Yes, but see . . . you could be coming too. . . ."

"How could I come amongst your friends? I've no clothes."

"I'm not so terribly badly off. I get paid for my translations and I've a little of my own. If we wanted any more I could become—a waiter, for instance. . . ."

"*You*—a waiter! . . ."

"Yes, why not? You don't think I could, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, it's not that. . . ."

"What is it, then? Tell me quickly, or I shall miss the train. . . ."

"I can't explain all in a minute. Besides, you know, as well as I do. . . ."

"Missie—tell me again. Would you rather I didn't go?"

"No," said Missie.

He gave her a hasty farewell kiss and dashed out. There was only just time to get to the station. He wouldn't have bothered, only he had promised to meet a man who was crossing

by the same boat. Of course, it was just like it, there wasn't a hansom in sight. . . .

He arrived on the platform at Charing Cross in time to see the train disappearing.

* * * * *

He was glad. He hadn't really wanted to go. Now he could go back and clear things up with Adelaide. It would have been horrible to dart off like that leaving them all untidy. He would have a drink first, and then stroll slowly back to Sherwood Street. He felt a bit blown with all this hurrying.

A gin-and-bitters steadied him wonderfully and he set off at a good pace. Everything looked very much brighter than it had done for some time past. He had made up his mind. Post or no post, mother or no mother, Adelaide and he would get married. Let alone anything else, it wasn't *right* to go on like this. The situation was bringing out the worst in both of them. Adelaide, poor darling, was often a little cross, and no wonder! It was enough to try the temper of an angel, this waiting for something that was never going to happen. He would never get a post if he lived to be a hundred. He wasn't the sort.

It was a clear, sunny day, and London, for once, looked charming. He had been in the habit of comparing her to an ugly, fat, vulgar old woman, but perhaps that was just a trifle harsh. She wasn't such a bad old place. You

could be happy in that ample bosom. You could be happy anywhere if you were with the right person. Somewhere, in the heart of things, in Bloomsbury or Soho, Adelaide and he would find a garret and be radiantly happy.

Outside the door in Sherwood Street he paused, as he always did. She would be surprised to see him. This was rather a wonderful moment for both of them.

Inside, oddly enough, for it was a thing he had never seen in the restaurant before, a man and woman were embracing. It was rather dark coming in from the sunlight outside and he couldn't see who they were. In the circumstances the only thing to do was to go out again. He was just about to do this—he had his hand, in fact, on the handle of the door—when the couple broke apart and he saw—incredible, oh, most incredible!—that they were Adelaide and Auguste.

CHAPTER XIX

HIS first thought, as they stood and faced him with their young, open, guileless Slavic faces, was that he ought to feel anger. He even managed to make the sort of remarks you did make at such moments—the remarks that were expected of you—"What does this mean?"—"How long has this been going on?"—and so forth. But it was not anger that he had felt, only a sense of inevitability, for confronting him was Missie, her hand in Auguste's, and a look on her face that he, in all their intercourse, had never surprised there.

They had answered his questions, but he was never able afterwards to remember what they had said. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Now that it was too late he could see his mistake quite clearly. He had been occupied with the business of being a gentleman, but love, like death, is not concerned with the transient values of mankind and does not care whether a man is a gentleman or not, but only with whether he is a lover. He had forgotten that: his instinct had been overlaid. But Auguste, with his unsullied manhood, had taken her easily,

easily. What were a thousand poems when it came to the shelter of a man's arms? She had chosen the better lover.

As time went on he came not to mind so much because life was short in any case. He had always had that inward assurance that he would not live beyond the end of the century, and now he felt definitely ill. Wherever he went the footsteps of those he had lost seemed to echo in his empty heart. All he wanted was to rest.

Before long, however, he was aware that a very strange thing had happened. He felt battered, used and done for, but he was back on his cloud. True, the golden haze in which he had formerly been wrapped had given place to a dim grey mist, while the rainbow that had led to Adelaide was only to be seen through a rain of tears, but the poems, which were the essence or emanation of his love, were indestructible.

So now the publication of his book became his one thought, and he was constantly turning over in his mind the form which the dedication should take, for here, at last, was his chance of telling Adelaide, in words she could not mistake, of what she had been to him.

Meanwhile, he drifted again to Brittany and there one day, while browsing in a second-hand bookshop, he came across the works of an obscure French writer in which was a passage that fulfilled his need.

"Votre personne, vos moindres mouvements me semblaient avoir dans le monde une importance extra-humaine. Mon cœur comme de la poussière se soulevait derrière vos pas. Vous me faisiez l'effet d'un claire-de-lune par une nuit d'été, quand tout est parfums, ombres douces, blancheurs, infini; et les délices de la chair et de l'âme étaient contenues pour moi dans votre nom que je me répétais en tachant de le baiser sur mes lèvres.

"Quelquefois vos paroles me reviennent comme un écho lointain, comme le son d'une cloche apporté par le vent; et il me semble que vous êtes là quand je lis des passages de l'amour dans les livres. . . . Tout ce qu'on y blâme d'exagéré, vous me l'avez fait ressentir."

It was a question whether to turn it into English. How would it sound?

"Your person, your least movements, seemed to me to have in the world an importance beyond that of ordinary humanity. My heart, like the dust, rose behind your steps. You gave me the effect of a moonlight night in summer, when all is perfume, soft shadow, whiteness, infinite; and the delights of the flesh and the soul were contained for me in your name which I repeated while trying to kiss it on my lips.

"Sometimes your words come back to me like a far-away echo, like the sound of a bell carried by the wind; and it seems to me that you are present when I am reading love passages

in books. . . . All that is there condemned as exaggerated you have made me feel."

No, he thought not. It was better in the original. Besides, the kind of people who would read what he had written were certain to be conversant with French.

* * * * *

It was just about now, in the latter part of May eighteen-ninety-six, that the Plarrs had a letter from him which ran:

"My dear Victor,—I am ashamed of myself for not having long ago answered your charming letter, from Pont-Aven, but constant ill-health and depression of spirits have made me a sorry correspondent. At least, I will not go away from this place, with which we both have had pleasant associations, without putting myself in touch with you. You will remember the room (*salle à manger*) in which I am writing. This visit of mine has not been a success; I came up from Pont-Aven only two days ago, to see if the change of air—from Pont-Aven to Faouët is really an enormous change, though it may sound ridiculous to you—would do me any good, and to spend a fortnight. But the ineffable *tristesse* of the place is too much for me and I am returning to what is more or less my permanent home and address (Hôtel Gloanec, Pont-Aven, Finistère) to-morrow. Faouët is charming in the

daytime. One can work without interruption, and, tired of work, one can bask in the blazing sunshine by Sainte-Barbe. But the evenings, the cold, bleak desolation of the evenings! Perhaps Pont-Aven, where I know everybody, and have many friends, French, English, and Breton, has spoilt me; perhaps Le Faouët has changed, more likely I have. But I have not the courage to stay here by myself. It is more beautiful, however, now than in full summer. There is no one in either hotel. Our old friend Jeanne has retired and Madame Mitouard (who asks to be remembered to you) is shaky on her pins. Marie-Joseph has gone to Paris. Miss or Meese Rose, who spoke English, is post-mistress or tobacconist at Vannes. The two little twins, whom Moore and I admired much at the *billiard*, are grown into ugly and farouche girls of twelve. And the two trees, whom [?which] Moore christened the 'Sisters Limejuice,' are cut down. Eheu fugaces! But it is probably I who have changed, more than Faouët, and doubtless if I were here with you and Moore I should love the place again. But in my sick and sorry old age I begin to be dependent on society: so I am off to Pont-Aven *après demain*, and there I hope you will write to me.

"I hope you and yours prosper. It is long since I have heard news of you. My poems will be out in a day or two—perhaps are out now. You must forgive the freedom I have taken

with yours and your wife's name in my inscription to my poem on Marion. I am full up with work of various kinds and I suppose I ought to be satisfied with myself, for it is all work that pays. But as I have no lungs left to speak of, an apology for a liver, and a broken heart I may be permitted to rail a little sometimes.

"Write to me soon, mon Vieux. I shall be at Pont-Aven for two or three months and winter probably in Paris. Smith, Smithers and Moore are my only regular correspondents. Johnson sends me messages, with promises of speedy letters, but has not written as yet since I started on my wanderings. Missie writes to me fairly often, *friendly* letters, which give me sleepless nights and cause me to shed morbid and puerile tears. But she is very kind. . . ."

Here, Victor, who was reading the letter aloud to his wife at the breakfast table, broke off.

"Poor Ernest! . . ." sighed Nellie, shaking her head.

"Poor foolish Ernest!" amended Victor.

"I've never quite been able to make out your objection to that affair."

"It was purely instinctive. Also, I admit, I was not entirely convinced of its genuineness. . . . There's an admirable story—French, of course,—about a man who fell in love with one

of those female figures that you see in the windows of drapers' shops—as it might be Harrod's. . . ." Nellie could not help smiling at the image thus conjured up. "So many affairs," pursued Victor, veering, as was his wont, from the particular to the general, "seem to me to be rather of that sort. Moreover, in these days of manifold cults and poses you never can be sure how far you are meant to take things literally. When anybody of my acquaintance begins to talk about art with a big A they become suspect."

"I never thought of Ernest as a poseur," protested Nellie. "As a matter of fact he always seemed to me to be singularly free from the current affectations."

"Do you realise," said Victor suddenly, "that we're talking about him as if he were dead? That's this letter of his. It's like a voice from another world. . . . To me it's one of the frightening things about life, the way, as one grows older, one's friends drift away, or die, or forget one. . . ."

"A little more bacon?" interposed Nellie, who had not been married to a poet for close on four years for nothing. "Or another sausage?"

"No, thanks," replied Victor, continuing after a moment, absently, "I don't know why we never have sardines. . . . And, by the way, talking of sardines, it's so typical of our dear Ernest that he should choose to live in the land

of the sardine, where they haven't such a thing as an armchair, or a bathroom. . . . Look at this letter—written in the *salle-à-manger*, and why?—because there's no sitting-room any more than there is in any other French hotel. How he can endure the sheer discomfort . . . But, of course, he's profoundly unpractical, as we know. I only hope it won't lead to disaster, but I don't like the sound of things. . . ."

Nellie said: "I'm thankful to hear that he's got plenty of work at any rate, and that his book's coming out."

"Yes, the poet has his consolations," conceded Victor.

* * * * *

The book was published towards the end of June by Leonard Smithers under the title *Verses* with a dedication that read: "For Adelaide—To you, who are my verses, as on some very future day, if you ever care to read them you will understand, would it not be somewhat trivial to dedicate any one verse, as I may do, in all humility, to my friends? Trivial too, perhaps, only to name you even here? Trivial, presumptuous. For I need not write your name for you at least to know that this and all my work is made for you in the first place, and I need not to be reminded by my critics that I have no silver tongue such as were fit to praise

you. So for once you shall go indedicate, if not quite anonymous; and I will only commend my little book to you in sentences far beyond my poor compass which will help you perhaps to be kind to it": and then followed the passage by the unknown Frenchman.

The edition was limited, not to three hundred and fifty copies, but to three hundred and thirty, three hundred of which were printed on hand-made paper and the rest on Japanese vellum. They were bound in parchment upon which was a very exquisite decoration of gilt lines by Aubrey Beardsley. Unfortunately, the critics did not seem to care very greatly for what was inside.

Take, for instance, the man on the *Pall Mall Gazette*. . . .

" . . . The whole horizon of a poet is not," he wrote, "or ought not to be, confined to an entirely erotic and sentimental region, to a few musk-scented fancies, ranging from a dalliance so innocent that it never gets beyond glances, to phantasmal passions of a somewhat uncomfortable character. . . ." (Or was it a woman? . . . No, because it went on to say:) "Mr. Dowson's language is stately and melodious, and has just that suspicion of a classical aroma which quickens the sense of pleasure and touches old associations." (Women had no associations with the classics, old or otherwise.)

Then came an interlude of damning with faint praise:

"What could be more 'anthological' than

'Neobule, being tired,
Far too tired to laugh or weep,
From the hours rosy and gray,
Hid her golden face away.
Neobule, fain of sleep,
Slept at last as she desired!'

And the rest is as good. 'Terre Promise' is admirable; so is the little prelude; so is the 'Chanson sans Parole':

'She will hearken and glide
From her place of deep rest,
Dove-eyed, with the breast
Of a dove, to my side.'"

Then, suddenly turning nasty, in the way critics have, he finished up with:

"But one thing, Mr. Dowson! Do not, in future issues, put the names of your friends, to whom you dedicate your poems, between the title and the text, especially when they are dedicated 'for' and not 'to' them. It is generally misleading, sometimes painful, occasionally grotesque."

Well, that last sentence must have done the

fellow a world of good, thought Ernest, who was down on earth with a vengeance at this juncture. The worst of it was, though, the *Pall Mall* had a huge circulation. Everyone would see what the pig had said—God!—and be sorry for one.

Now what had been in the mind of the critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette* when he wrote the foregoing was that you had got to be very careful indeed when it came to any of Smithers's publications. For Smithers was always bringing out books that couldn't possibly be left on those drawing-room tables which, though they might no longer support family albums and aspidistras, were still the clearing-houses of the family morals. He published translations from the French that were well—really! . . . You might be pretty certain that an author who was at all particular about such things wouldn't go to Smithers for publication. Ernest Dowson was, in fact, one of Smithers's young men, and the name of Smithers on the back of his book didn't do him any good with people who were outside "the movement."

He was horribly cast down. He saw now that he should never have published his poems. It was a mistake to show work to the unfeeling world that had been torn from you as they had been. They weren't like poems that had been written in the calm security of the study: every one of them, almost, represented some moment

of acute emotion, were, in fact, as the fellow had said, the outcome of "passions of a somewhat uncomfortable character." They were Adelaide, who should have been kept hidden in the deepest recesses of one's heart: only if you were to follow that precept there would never be any poetry worth the name, or any music, or painting, or any art at all, and civilisation would long ago have ceased. And what matter? What did anything matter? Even Le Gallienne was tepid and seemed to be trying to make the best of an amateurish effort.

"Thus gathered together," ran the Le Gallienne critique, "they make a more striking impression than, owing to their almost fragile delicacy, they were able to make when printed separately, as one needs a handful of some flowers to perceive their fragrance and colour. . . ."

Delicacy! Why hadn't he said *anæmia* while he was about it? That was no doubt what he thought. You put the whole of your life's blood into a thing to be told the result was delicate. It was almost as bad as if he had used that putrescent word *dainty* that was on everybody's lips at the present moment. If he had said that it would have been the end. At least he had had the courage to quote "Cynara" and to call it *wonderful.* "Sometimes Mr. Dowson strikes almost a sternly passionate note, as in his wonderful *Cynara*"—was what he had said.

But did he mean that? Wasn't it just done out of friendship and because he knew, being a poet himself and a kind fellow, that poets need oceans and oceans of praise if they are to survive at all and that the more they get the more they want? . . .

But there was no answer to this question. And indeed it was more than a mere matter of the poems as poems. He felt that it was almost as though he had killed Adelaide.

CHAPTER XX

IT was the year eighteen-ninety-eight. The movement, which had long shown signs of mortal weakness, had finally collapsed and was now fast sinking into decay. But ruins are always more or less picturesque, and in this case the survivors of the catastrophe were expected to exhibit at least a modicum of that element: to be pale, shadowy, remorseful figures, staggering hither and thither in a vain attempt to expiate their former wickedness.

Of these Ernest was aware, though dimly, for by now all his sensations were rather indistinct, that he was looked upon as a symbol of his epoch, as a relic, a curiosity. He was further aware, with perhaps a little more acuteness, that he was in the grip of lung trouble and that he would do well to take himself off to a sanatorium. But who shall say whether the survivors of great calamities do not realise the dramatic quality that is inherent in their state? And sanatoriums are somewhat bourgeois places, after all, as well as expensive.

People would say to one another, shuddering, that they had seen Dowson in Paris, or Dieppe,

or London, looking like some poor wraith returned to haunt the places he had known in life. It was observed that he was often in that lounge in the Strand known as The Bun Shop, and that there, when he had been served with the drink he had ordered, he could be seen to abstract a little gold cross from his waistcoat pocket and dip it in the liquid before he drank. It was remarked that he was never penniless, indeed, he was always to the fore when it came to paying for other people's drinks, but he was haggard, wan, to the last degree pitiable, his clothes so nearly in rags that it was almost heroic to be seen talking to him. Yet when he encountered someone he had known in more prosperous days there would peep forth a sufficient glimpse of the old Ernest to enable them to overlook a state of dilapidation that they could not otherwise have borne.

His contemporaries were secretly rather pleased with this portrait that was presented to them of a survivor of their remarkable period. There was much that was Elizabethan about it. Marlowe, Ben Jonson, even Shakespeare, had known what it was to be hungry. Dowson, they said, like Beardsley, had been true to his art. *He* had not cut his hair, donned a top-hat and gone to live in a suburb with a wife as had others they could name. *Renegades!* Moreover, it was said, that upon being asked if he had ever known what it was to love, he had replied in the words

of Voltaire: "Vous me demandez si j'ai aimé; oui! c'est une histoire singulière et terrible!"

Verily could they say "Poor Dowson!" Henceforth, in fact, he was seldom to be spoken of without the word *poor* as a prefix, like a title of honour or a form of Christian name. Sometimes, though, it would be *Poor* Ernest, or, again, *Poor Douzeuc*, for the Breton variant of his name had stuck to him and was used by some of his former intimates.

But there were such a number of *Poors* about just then. There was *Poor* Johnson, who had shut himself up in his chambers and, so it was rumoured, was slowly drinking himself to death; and *Poor* Crackanthorpe, who had committed suicide; and *Poor* Beardsley, who was dead of consumption at the age of twenty-six; and *Poor* Hillier, who was in a mad asylum; and *Poor* Wilde—only he was so overwhelmingly *poor* that his name was hardly mentioned above a whisper—as well as a great many more who were felt to be well on the way to being *poor* if only they were given time; while over in France *Poor* Verlaine, the greatest of all the *poors*, had died in a squalor that truly befitted the superlative nature of his poorness. The end of a mad, bad, but magnificent age, people said —not unlike a portion of the *cinque-cento*.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, curiously enough, there were

still those who bothered about the shell of what had once been Ernest Dowson. There were some, even, who asked him to stay with them. Thus, in a life which consisted of drifting from place to place, he rested a moment with the Plarrs while on his way between France and Ireland.

This time the door was opened by a maid. It was, of course, hardly the thing to open your own front door in Kensington.

"Ah, there you are, my dear fellow!" cried Victor, emerging as he spoke from somewhere in the background. "It's delightful to see you again after all these years. We've missed you more than I can express."

Odd that people could still feel like that, thought Ernest.

There was no doubting it. Tears were in Victor's eyes.

"You've chosen a most auspicious moment," he went on. "To-morrow I start in my new post as Librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons of England—no less."

Ernest coughed. "I wonder if you'll come across a man I used to know—Brownlow his name was. Hardly though. . . . You'll be among the great." He broke off, to continue dreamily: "I had a fellow-feeling for Brownlow. He didn't know something he ought to have known."

"That's a very nasty cough of yours, my dear

man," observed Victor anxiously. "Have you had it long?"

"Some time. I believe I smoke too much."

"D'you still smoke the same cigars? They were called *Veveys* I remember. . . . But come along in. This is our bookroom."

A larger room than of yore, but the same books. The wallpaper with the peacock's feathers was missing, but there were Morris hangings —a bold design of horse-chestnuts and their leaves on the palest of pale blue grounds.

"Jolly!" exclaimed Ernest in the ghost of a voice.

"It's extraordinary to think that you've not been here before," said Victor, "*most* extraordinary! This is our third year in this house."

"And you like it here?"

"Oh, it's better in every way than Blackheath. We've quite an interesting circle and Marion's attending a kindergarten at the High School."

"At school—Marion!"

"Yes. She's five years old. You'll see a change in her. Here, this is a comfortable chair. . . . I've not see you of course," continued Victor, handing the cigarette-box to his guest, "since Wilde was convicted—and now it's almost a year since his release."

"Yes, poor devil!"

"Poor—heh?"

"You'd think so if you saw him."

"Have *you* seen him?"

"Yes. I called on him last time I was in Dieppe."

"You *what?* . . . My dear fellow, you can't mean that!"

"But of course . . ."

"If you're wise you'll be careful who you mention it to."

"I doubt if it matters much to anyone what I do in these days," observed Ernest sombrely.

"I assure you you can't talk about having been to see Wilde with impunity!" said Victor.

"I used to know him—once upon a time . . ."

"I shouldn't lay too much stress on that either!"

"But to me he was always—how shall I say? —such head and shoulders above the rest of us. His mind was so rapier keen. I've drunk of the man's wit—and now . . . You can't—you—well . . ." he broke off as though it was too great an effort to put his thought into words.

"You can't kick a dog when he's down," supplemented Victor. "All honour to you, my dear man, for feeling like that about it. But that's hardly the point. You obviously don't realise the state of public opinion in this country. It's running pretty high, I can tell you. It's as much as one's reputation's worth to admit to being a writer in these days, let alone an acquaintance of Wilde."

"In fact," said Ernest, not bitterly, but with a sad smile, " 'It's ill to be a villain, but worse to be found out.' "

"Oh, come! You can't wonder that everyone's disgusted. For my own part, I'm frankly thankful that I can say, with my hand on my heart, that I always loathed the man. His vanity was to me quite nauseating. And now, to think that this odious *vaniteux poseur* should have made the whole movement stink in the nostrils of the just. . . . Really, you must forgive me, but I can hardly speak of the thing with patience. . . . We, who thought to see a new flowering of art in this country, to see literature take an honourable place, have lived merely to witness a most signal triumph for the Philistine. It's too much!"

"So it appears—at the moment," said Ernest in his weakened voice. "But we can't have lived absolutely in vain—can we? all of us? Forces have been let loose. . . . You don't believe we shall ever go back to the purely moral standard in art again, Victor, do you?"

"God knows! You can't tell what may happen after a débâcle, and *such* a débâcle. There's never been anything quite like it as far as I can see, and, knowing my England, I fear the worst."

"A complete reaction?"

"A complete submergence of poetry, at any rate."

"But, surely, what Wilde has done cannot . . ."

"Sh—sh!" warned Victor. "I think I can hear my womenfolk approaching."

The door-handle was turned from without and a voice said: "Please, papa, may I come in?"

"Oh, it's only Marion," said her father with relief. "We can pursue the subject. Substitute initials for the name of him we're discussing and there'll be no harm done."

"Ah!" said Ernest, "you don't remember me?"

"No!" replied Marion.

" 'Let your communication be yea, yea, nay, nay!' " observed her father. "There's a notable brevity about my child."

Marion took a chair. She liked the bookroom because it smelled of cigarette smoke. It had been dull in the nursery, but probably in a little while it would be dull here too.

"I was just going to tell you before we were interrupted," continued Victor. "It's rather amusing. When my dear mother heard of O. W.'s arrest, she said: 'Good lack! why on earth do they want to make such a fuss?' She's of the old school, so that nothing surprises her. When you come to think of it, I suppose she can remember repercussions, at least, of the Byron scandal."

" '*Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne!*' " murmured Ernest.

"*Branloire?* Let's see . . . that's . . ."

" 'The world is but a perpetual see-saw.' "

"Exactly! You and I are able to realise that if the said O. W. had lived in the time of Nero, say, or Heliogabalus, or even our own Queen Elizabeth, his peculiarities would have passed unchallenged. But everyone is not a philosopher, my dear Ernest."

"And Nellie? . . ."

"Nellie's utterly horrified! However," here Victor dropped his voice a trifle, "between you and me I'm not at all sure that she knows what it's all about. But, my dear man, I assure you the whole subject's *tabu*, except among one's intimates, and even then you've got to be extremely careful what views you express. Here and there, of course, you'll come across someone who perceives that poor O. W. should be classed as a pathological abnormality, but until that's generally accepted—which it's never likely to be—it's better just to dissociate yourself from the whole thing."

"I see," said Ernest faintly.

* * * * *

What do you think of him?" asked Victor of his wife when he and she were alone together that night.

"I'm most dreadfully shocked!" said Nellie.

"He looks to me like a dying man."

"Is there nothing we can do? He's obviously neglecting himself."

"One can't broach these subjects, unfortunately. I did ask him how long he'd had his cough, but he was vague. I suppose there is someone . . . They had relations, I know. But, after all, he's what?—thirty, or more. You can't coerce a man of that age, and he never did look after himself. You ought to have seen the wretched insufficient meals he used to eat at that horrible little place in Soho. Well, anyhow, it's a good thing *that's* over."

"He didn't mention her, I suppose."

"Only to say that she was married last September—to the waiter!"

"Poor Ernest!"

"He's so lifeless, isn't he? I wasn't going to say anything about it, but I was simply horrified by one thing he told me. . . . He has been to see Wilde—to *see* him! Now I ask you . . ."

Nellie was silent. One didn't speak of Oscar Wilde, even in the privacy of one's bedroom.

"What am I going to do with him to-morrow," she said at length, "with you out?"

"Perhaps he'll come with me. But if not put him in the bookroom with Marion. He likes to sit and do nothing and you know how he always loved children. She'll do him good."

"I've been wondering all the evening," pursued Nellie, "if we could possibly give him one

of your suits before he leaves. That one he has on is scarcely decent."

After a pause, during which he pondered the idea of giving away a whole suit, Victor said: "I shouldn't think he'd mind. He's extraordinarily sweet-natured, the dear fellow. D'you know what he reminds me of?"

"No . . ."

"Those people in Victorian novels who were too saintly to survive their youth. There's something positively unearthly about his smile."

"He simply mustn't go out of this house in those clothes. The people he's going to will think us perfectly inhuman if we allow it."

"I leave that to you, dearest," said Victor. "I shouldn't have thought any suit of mine was worth having—however, you know best. Perhaps the dark grey one . . ."

"That was the one I thought. . . ."

"Did you notice at dinner," pursued Victor, "the way he hardly seemed to hear what one said? I did my utmost to be amusing, but it was uphill work."

"I should say he's probably feeling most frightfully ill."

"Yes, but you would have thought . . . For instance, he didn't say a word about my new post—not a word! It's very unlike him not to say the correct thing. He used to be ultra punctilious."

"Being here reminds him of old days, I expect," said Nellie.

* * * * *

The next morning, just before leaving for his work, Victor said: "Well, if you'd rather not come. . . . It's wretched luck I can't be at home to-day. We would have indited a good matter. And I'm afraid Nellie will have to be busy about the house. . . ."

"I shall be more than content if I can just sit quietly in your bookroom," said Ernest.

"You're sure? . . . There are plenty of cigarettes and Marion will do her best to entertain you, I've no doubt. She's at home from school just now because of some epidemic or other. What dreadful things they do get, poor dears, with their mumps and measles and whooping-cough. But she's escaped so far, I'm glad to say."

"Has she shown any further literary tendencies?" asked Ernest, coughing.

"I can't say she has. She's rather backward, we think. She doesn't read yet, whereas at her age some children are deep in their books. But my mother reads *to* her. Their principal literary fare at the moment seems to consist of *The Arabian Nights*—expurgated by my mother as she goes along—and some rather charming little goody-goody books, *Alone in London*, *Meg and the Children*, and *Jessica's First Prayer*. I was afraid a certain confusion of mind might ensue

what with the morals of the East and of the East End, but she's rapidly developing a most sturdy independence of mind. What d'you think she said last Sunday?—I was late up and the people were going by to church while I was at breakfast—'There go all the 'stitious people, papa!' I was much amused. I should hate to have a stupid child. I don't know which would be worse—a stupid child or a plain wife . . ."

Victor broke off. He knew that if he went on he would only get deeper and deeper into the mire. Superstition, wives, children, all these were ticklish subjects, but, really, the poor dear fellow was so silent, so utterly unlike himself, that it made one quite nervous.

"I shall hope to become better acquainted with Mademoiselle Marion in the course of the day," said Ernest, with that appalling smile of his.

"Well, I shall have to be off. It wouldn't do to be late on my first day."

They shook hands and Ernest watched him down the street. He was the same Victor. Perhaps in this always disintegrating world his was the one soul that would remain intact.

"What would you like to do?" asked Nellie, coming back into the breakfast-room from seeing her husband off.

"Victor and I have arranged that I am to make the further acquaintance of your daughter," said Ernest with a slight bow.

"Well, if you'd like that . . . But don't let her make herself a nuisance. Send her up to the nursery the moment you get tired of her, won't you?"

"She's more likely to become weary of me than I of her, I think," said Ernest gently.

Marion was sent for and presently came, accompanied by a large black pomeranian dog.

At first she was shy and busied herself obscurely in a distant part of the room, while Ernest smoked. After a time, however, it became evident that she had been doing a drawing for the benefit of the guest, for she appeared before him with a piece of paper on which was what she called a ship.

"That's very good," said Ernest. "Now draw me a house."

During the next half-hour she drew a number of things at his suggestion, while he sat huddled in his chair, empty of thought. But every time she appeared in front of him the dog was by her side, and at last, struck by the lambency of the creature's eyes, Ernest asked: "What's your dog called?"

"Pom," said Marion, and she added conversationally, "I try to dress him in my baby clothes and put him in my dolly's pram, but he won't let me."

"Perhaps he finds it rather stuffy," suggested Ernest. "He's got a fairly thick coat, hasn't he?"

Aware of being the subject under discussion the dog rolled over on its back and jerked its paws ingratiatingly.

"He wants to be rubbed," explained his mistress.

They rubbed Pom in silence for a space, whereupon Ernest remarked, as though to himself, "Pom must be a girl, I think."

"Oh no," said Marion, "dogs are hes. Cats are girls."

"Oh yes, of course, how silly of me—I forgot."

Here the prolonged stooping in order to rub the dog brought on Ernest's cough. When it had subsided Marion said: "Have you got whooping-cough?"

"No. Mine is a different kind."

"What sort of cough is it you've got?" she asked with the inexorable persistence of childhood.

"A sort that grown-up people get," said Ernest.

"How old are you?" she enquired next, according to formula.

"I'm thirty-one."

"I'm five. . . . Have you any brothers and sisters?"

"I've one brother—yes."

"I've got lots," said Marion. "All grown up."

"Really!" observed Ernest, somewhat startled. "Where do they live?"

"Well," she returned slowly, as though giving him time to take it in, "there's one in Japan . . . and one's in Canada . . . and there are two in Bermuda."

"Then I suppose you don't see much of them?"

"No, but I write to them."

"And do they answer your letters?"

"Oh yes!"

"What are they doing, scattered all over the world like that?"

"They're married," said Marion firmly.

There was a pause. Ernest remembered that there was something he wanted to say to this child—something important. Now was his chance. He might never see her again—another two years. . . . What was it? . . . Oh yes. . . . "When you were a very little girl I wanted you to be called Mansueta. *Mansueta*. . . . Can you remember that? Say it after me—Man-su-e-ta."

"Man-su-e-ta," repeated Marion obediently.

"It means . . ." began Ernest, but again he was seized by his cough, and this time the paroxysm was of such violence that at the end of it he was only able to gasp, "It—means—*mercy* . . ."

Marion stood and gazed at him without speaking.

CHAPTER XXI

FROM the *Daily Chronicle* of February 26th, 1900:

"Mr. Ernest Dowson, one of our younger poets, died on Friday at the early age of thirty-two, while on a visit to Catford, in Kent. Though he had been suffering for a long time from consumption his death from syncope was sudden and unexpected. It came as a shock to his many friends, expecting, as they were, the publication in a few days of his new book. . . ."

So after all he had lived on, if only by eight weeks, into the new century.

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